

The greatest hero of all battles for the greatest treasure of all — his very soul!

CONAN

ANDREW J. OFFUTT

CONAN THE MERCENARY

ACE 11659-0 | \$2.50 SF





CONAN THE MERCENARY

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51 Madison Avenue
New York, New York 10010

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PROLOGUE

The old man's skull gleamed in the lamplight that picked out brownish spots scattered over the tight-drawn skin. Pale yellow light emanated from four oil lamps set in a complicated sculpture suspended from the ceiling. Daily a servant lowered the fixture on its chain to fill the lamps, which he later lit from a taper.

The hairless dome thus unflatteringly lit belonged to my lord Sabaninus, Baron of Korveka. His chain and medallion of rank hung heavy on the breast of a robe of wine-dyed woolen. The robe was high of neck and long of sleeve, though neither weather nor this chamber of his office was cold.

Slowly the baron lifted a wrinkled and liver-spotted hand to the jaw-long strands of hair that hung at his ear, framing his skull in a lank fringe the color of cream. Even the last mocking remnant of his former mane was yellowing with age, as were his nails. Korveka's lord blinked, leaning a bit forward across his desk to look at his visitor.

Was it sheer imagination that there seemed an aura of malign genius about this man from so very, very far away, however dimly the baron saw him?

Sabaninus blinked again. The Baron of Korveka thought that no one discerned his failing sight and daily headaches; the truth was that none who more than glanced at him could fail to note how he blinked, and squinted, and strained ever



forward in his effort to distinguish the details his eyes refused to report.

My lord baron was certain of one detail concerning his visitor. The man's skin was yellow as a dying flower or as gold seen at sunset.

The lord of Korveka had never before encountered a yellow-skinned person. This one he was delighted to see—almost to see—because the younger man had made the baron an offer; a most strange and tempting offer indeed.

In silence, Sabaninus considered it. The two men gazed at each other. Neither moved. Above,

the lamps burned silently. None would interrupt; so had Baron Sabaninus ordered. Sabaninus pondered the offer, and his past—and his future.

The lord of the far northwestern uplands of Koth was a widower. Nor had either of his wives borne him a son to inherit the domain of meadowland that produced such fine crops at the foothills of rearing mountains. Not even a daughter had his wives produced, a girl he might have wed to some other noble's son, to preside over Korveka and produce sons to carry on the line; even that were better than the situation in which he found himself. The baron was no happy man.

Sabaninus knew that at court in Khorshemish had long been referred to as "Baron Farm-lout" and "Lord Bumpkin" and, of late, That Wrinkly Old Farm-lord of the Blue Lake Country. Other nobles of the ancient Hyborian kingdom plotted incessantly. None had approached Sabaninus for years. Neither his support nor his advice was any longer sought. His produce was valuable; he was harmless. He was neither an intimate of king and court, nor out of favor. None sought him as ally and none sought his counsel. People of other lands knew Koth for its superbly made armor; none came from Korveka. The barony's fertile land, fed by clear lakes and rivers emanating in the mountains, was effectively cut off from the rest of the country by that natural wall of granite. Here the land was too hospitable to animals and foodcrops to be wasted in the production of aught else. Even as far as Hyrkania across the Vilayet Sea; even as far as Zamboula to the south, men of weapons wore Kothian armor. Who beyond Koth's capital knew of Korvekan lettuce or cab-

bage or olives? What people truly appreciated those who fed them, in their cities and palaces? When Sabaninus of Korveka was thought of or mentioned, it was as that quaint old provincial noble from over in the mountains; the hermetish old fellow who sent such fine produce to the palace and markets of Khorshemish. Oh yes, Korvekan wool is superior—have you heard the latest about that handsome guard captain and the queen's cousin's wife . . . ?

Royal decree had long forbidden his trading with his neighbor, the little kingdom of Khauran, a wedge nestled up to Korveka's easternmost border. Fierce sky-reaching mountains separated Korveka from Corinthia and Zamora to the north. Korveka, which might well have been a kingdom on its own, was all but forgotten.

"Khauran," Sabaninus muttered.

"Aye. Khauran of the Unhappy Queens," his visitor said in his glutinous voice.

Ah, Sabaninus thought, if only he could have made alliance with the current queen or her predecessor—however fat, after her widowing. What a hero he would be in Koth; in Khorshemish! Koth's narrow-eyed, plot-wary kings had long given jealous and calculating thought to the diminutive eastern neighbor. With a Kothian on its throne—a Korvekan!—alliance might well develop into . . . more; into a sort of annexation of Khauran; a satrapy whose future ruler would be of Kothian blood.

My lord Sabinamus, son of Sabaninus, Lord of Korveka and King of Koth!

A smile flirted with Sabaninus's sagging mouth. Such a prospect, along with his becoming

instantly honored hero, meant more to him than did wearing Khauran's crown.

It was his own people he had ever wanted to impress, during all the twoscore years since he, at forty-two, had inherited his father's medallion and title. The medallion of sapphire-set gold had grown steadily heavier, and its chain; the meaning of the title had not appreciated. To be invited into the glittering palace in Khorshemish! To pass between lines of admiring and envious nobles; to be announced and honored, welcomed and raised by a grateful king! Never again to be indicated as a bumpkinish upland farm-lord! Oh, aye! He'd gladly make the long ride down to the west to such a purpose, such a reception!

His visitor smiled. "And perhaps my lord baron is wise at that; as king over Khauran you would be but consort, and ever aware and wary of Koth, and justifiably nervous of invasion."

"You know my very thoughts, man of Khitai?"

"I have many abilities, Baron, but the reading of minds is not one of them. I am merely no fool; a wise man would know how you would think, having heard my proposal and taken time to reflect."

"Youth."

"Ah." A smooth, gold-sheened hand rose, first finger uplifted as if in admonition. "Not youth, Sabaninus of Korveka. The appearance of youth; the feel of it. That we can obtain for you. Inside, you remain the same man, and you surely cannot be offended by my pointing out that Death still has his burning eye on you."

The baron sighed, staring intently, and the sigh wheezed out through a mouth in which less than

half the teeth remained. One ached even now.

"My hair . . ."

"Full, and brown."

"My . . . my mouth . . ."

"Firm of lip. Were your teeth white? They will be whiter."

Sabaninus lifted his hands and regarded them, turning them. "My—"

"Smooth and strong. The hands of a man of . . . I can remove two of each three years of your age, Baron. Yours will be the hands and hair and teeth—and the sight—of a man of thirty. Are these enough. Baron of Korveka?"

The old nobleman swallowed hard. "Baron of the Mountains of Gloom; Baron of the Farms; My Lord Shepherd." Perhaps his eyes were rheumy as he uttered the harsh words so softly spoken; perhaps tears sparkled there. He closed those eyes in a long, long blink

. "To me . . . to be the age of thirty is . . . is as adolescence to others, Khi Zang."

The yellow-skinned man sat in silence. They two sat alone in the baron's room of office, and would not be interrupted. Light flickered on bald head and on the visitor's old-gold skin.

"You are . . . certain, Khi Zang, that this can be accomplished."

"I am. It is not without cost."

The baron showed attentiveness while maintaining silence. The Khitan made a brief, dismissive gesture.

"It will cost a life; one life for Koth! There is no danger to you: none. Once the transformation is accomplished, you will of course be wise to move swiftly, for though your appearance will be that of

such a younger man, you will still be . . . you."

"It is not enough, of course."

"Of course it is not. Youth is the goal of all; its semblance is but a mocking reminder of what was. Yet you do not need me to remind you that neither is death enough, nor lack of proper recognition for one such as you."

"Aye. After fourscore and two years. But to seem to be thirty . . ."

"Aye, Baron. It is not enough. But what man has even so much as the appearance of being younger?"

The baron stared at the man whom he saw as through a thick morning gaze, or through an ell of water, however clear. "Khitan . . . Khi Zang . . . you? How old are you?"

Strong white teeth flashed in a yellow-bronze face as the Khitan laughed. "I wondered when you would be minded of that! How old do you think I am?"

"I—"

"Do not dissemble with me, Sabaninus," Khi Zang said, the first in many years to call the other by his name. "I know you see but poorly, and strain even for that!"

Sabaninus was a while assimilating that, and wondering if others knew. Probably. He had lied even to himself. And now . . . was this young visitor from a land so far away as to be considered legend by many . . . was he lying? Was it a trick? Was Sabaninus of Korveka once again but the butt of a joke, of contempt?

Most desperately, he did not want to believe that he was; he wanted to believe Khi Zang of Khitai. "You appear . . . little more than . . .

thirty."

The Khitan said equably, "My son is older than that, Baron. Indeed, Zang is nearly fifty. And aye, I have come thousands of miles to visit you. My years are not gone from me; they are no longer visible. Nor do I feel them—save in the mind."

"You remember all."

"I do."

"And you have journeyed all this way to offer me y—the appearance of youth."

"I have."

"Why?"

Khi Zang sat forward. "At some time in future, Sabaninus of Korveka, I or my son will have business in Khauran. We will ask nothing that you—or your son?—cannot give, in willingness. A temple. That is in future, Sabaninus; how much future have you? Presently, I will have a saddlebag of you—one saddlebag, Baron—filled with that which you have hidden here in quantity. Gold."

"Gold! You know even of—"

"I do. The fortune of the House of Saban, and of what value is gold to a man who dies old and alone and heirless?"

"You are in my home, and you are cruel, Khitan!"

Khi Zang saw that there was strength and fire in the baron yet, and he bowed his head. "Cruel. Aye, honesty is cruelty, to the old. What need is there for men so old as we to avoid facts lest they be 'cruel', Baron of Korveka? Come, Sabaninus. Had I said, 'What would you pay for youth?' you'd have blurted, 'All I have!' For the appearance of youth, then, and the opportunity it brings . . .

what? The twentieth part of all you possess? A deed of gratitude to be paid by the queen and prince you leave upon dying; a debt to be paid by architecture? Your soul and your fortune remain yours, Sabaninus of Korveka."

Do they, Sabaninus thought, and his brain was amoil. He said, "O Lady Ishtar! How can I refuse you?"

This he asked helplessly, feeling that he should. The Khitan was right. His life was all that a man possessed of real value; that and his honor and his dreams. Gold and some future claim; these were not comparable. Nor even was wisdom and further reflection. Tonight, tomorrow, next month might bring the fulfilling of his years on this plane. Sabaninus considered, and reflected, and cast consideration and reflection from him with a saddlebag full of gold.

What was gold? But—what was this about . . . a life? Immediately he became wary again; surely the man would not demand the son he hoped to get on Queen Ialamis?

He had said, "How can I refuse you?" and Khi Zang said nothing.

"I will do it. What must be done? Tell me in detail. Life? What life is demanded?"

"Open to us the final keep of this keep; your underground chamber of final refuge. Fetch, bring, lure to us there—for the how of it does not matter—a maiden. You will be present, and you must be careful to do as I direct."

"I . . . I am not to slay . . ."

"No! You are to be still, and silent, and to observe. You are afflicted with a concept of what is Good, and what is Bad. Tonight you must put

such superstitions from you: for yourself, for Koth! These things that I have stated and they only are required of you, Baron of Korveka. Of me: my skills. Of her: her unimportant life."

"You keep reminding me . . ."

"Yes. I will not lie or dissemble to you, Sabaninus. I have not found that which is free in this world; have you, in fourscore and two years? Your gain—perhaps Koth's gain—is to be bought at the cost of another's life. So it must be, and so you must understand."

The baron raised tremulous, liver-spotted, spindly hands before his sunken old face. *I am not a bad man. I have never been a bad man. It is for Korveka, and for Koth!* Through his hands his voice was low, muffled:

"I will do it."

Nateela of Ophir was eighteen and she had been slave for eighteen years.

Happiness had begun for her the day a man in rustic attire had bought her in Khorshemish. Knowing then only that he smelled of sheep and was some far lord's steward, she had been more than apprehensive on the long trek east and north. Beyond those menacing, difficult mountains she had gazed upon a land of lovely lakes and rolling greenlands dotted with sheep and kine. As the party of her new owners descended, she saw that laboriously constructed fences of gray rock blocked the grazing animals from the land under cultivation. There grew crops and the people seemed happy enough. Then she knew new fear, when her escort headed for the great baronial manse, bearing city-bought supplies, clinking

saddlebags, and . . . the new human property: Nateela.

There had been no need of fear. She had been eleven then, and for seven years Nateela had known happiness and peace, good food and adequate rest, and never a beating. Now she did not care ever to leave the domain of the baron of Korveka. She secretly loved the man, as an uncle or father. Her woman's love was an altogether different matter, and was reserved for Vanirius, son of the steward. Not that that handsome young free man took note.

This night Nateela did not know why the baron had been so long below, in that moldy keep of keeps, with his strange guest. Nor did she question, or much care. She had been told—by the baron himself—to fetch them not wine but cider, about the time the moon was over the shearing enclosure.

She was not anxious to descend into the darkness of the underground chamber designed so long ago as final haven for the baronial family in the event of siege. She went. Her lord was below; she trusted her lord and served him willingly. He was no bad man and now surely had but few years left him. It was strange only that he had not wanted wine, down there in the dark and the damp, to allay such pains as that in his left leg and his right elbow and left shoulder. They plagued him much, she knew. She wished she were a sorcerer, to rid him of his pain.

He was so old. It was stupid to talk, as some philosophers were said to do, of "average life expectancy"; for the number of years thus arrived at averaged in the many many who died in the

first year or two of their lives—and the many women who succumbed to childbed fever. Even so the lord baron of Korveka had lived beyond the span gained by very few men, and fewer women. Nateela was aware of this, and the only apprehension she now knew was what might befall her after his inevitable death. Inexplicably he had chosen no successor, adopted no one; the King in Khorshemish would surely take the lands and send another lord to preside over them. Or perhaps one would accept the lands and their revenues, but remain on the other side of the mountains rather than live so far from the capital. Then nothing would change, for the steward was no mean man, and his son Vanirius . . .

Nateela did not think on it. She but served the lord Sabaninus well and loyally, and with love.

The air as she descended was thick and musty, smelling of earth—though she smelled, strangely, the burning herbs of incense. That was nice, though a bit thickly cloying. The old, old steps were dark. From below, candles or lamps flickered in invitation, and she heard the two men talking. Crouching a bit to avoid cobwebs, she descended slowly and quietly, with care though without stealth.

She heard the baron's voice, and then she could distinguish the words: "My steward has been told that you and I depart very late tonight, alone, for Khorshemish. So have I told my household overseer. Both have retired, probably thinking to try to aid me on the morrow. Meanwhile, two men await the appearance of you and my nephew, Sergianus. They are—or had better be!—at the stable, with horses and provisions prepared for us four."

"You appear to have arranged well." Nateela heard the deep, accented voice of the strange, yellow man. "And the girl?"

"Ishtar forgive me," the baron said in a low voice more tremulous than usual. "She should be bringing us refreshment now. Your preparations are complete?"

"They are, Sabaninus."

Nateela wondered at their words, but forgot them in her astonishment at hearing her lord called by name. Never before had she heard that done, in his presence. She descended, and bethought her that it were wise to make a sound. A good servant, she coughed.

"Just do remain by me within this circle," the Khitan went on.

"Perhaps—"

"Save it, Baron of Korveka; that cough is a good servant's announcement of approach."

Oh good, Nateela thought; the poor old baron probably hadn't heard.

The Khitan's voice rose in volume; "And none too soon; this musty air belowground does dry a man's mouth and throat!"

The two men fell silent, then. Nateela was glad that the strange yellow man had heard her. The lord baron doubtless heard little more, these days, than he saw. Poor man, poor old man with neither wife nor son nor daughter; *how my heart goes out to him! And a good man, too!*

She stepped down onto the floor of the keep within the keep. A gasp escaped her, for the earth was cold and hard beneath her feet.

"Good sweet cider, my lords."

"What a lovely gift from such a lovely child, my

dear," the Khitan said, and he smiled.

He was not unhandsome, she supposed. His color, the glossy blackness of his course-looking hair, the strangeness of his almond shapes of eyes; these aspects of his appearance were new to her, and different and undreamt, so that Nateela could not be comfortable in his presence. She managed a tiny smile and was aware of his black eyes on her while she carried her salver to the baron.

The lord of Korveka wore a full-sleeved white blouse and a particularly loose scarlet riding-jupon over leggings just as loose.

Both men watched her appreciatively. Though some slaves were left bare above the waist for the good of their spirits and the delectation of their masters, this was not true in the household of Sabaninus of Korveka. True, Nateela wore little. Just as true, that fact made her more interesting to look upon than had she been bare-chested. The yellow-trimmed halter of Kothian green swayed and jiggled with her steps, and the sway of her hips was sensuously visible above the low-slung drawstring of her long skirt of the same hue. Save for a copper bracelet and an amulet suspended on a simple cord about her neck, Nateela wore naught else.

"How beautifully made you are, my dear child," the Khitan said, as if he were much older.

She flashed him a smile, her lashes lowered, while he took the large mug of cider from her tray.

He stepped back from her, one pace toward the baron. He spoke strange words in stranger inflections. Nothing he murmured was in any language she knew or knew of, but strangely fluid and not unlike a song.

"Thank you, Nateela," the baron said in a quav-
ery voice. He looked as if he were in mourning.
"You are loved, Nateela."

"Thank you, my lord," the Ophirean said while
she felt her heart would burst with happiness.
What a lovely thing for him to say! What a dear
lord she had!

Hearing a sound behind her, she took no note of
how the Khitan swiftly knelt to draw a short arc; it
completed the circle in which he and Baron
Sabaninus stood. Nateela looked around.

They were no longer alone in that underground
chamber so fitfully lit, and she was too fear-
stricken even to shriek. Nor was the newcomer
anything that approached the human form.

An awful croak boomed from the thing. Its bulk
was massive, a huge dark form in which details
were not clear; it was a slice of night. All Nateela
saw clearly were terrible glaring eyes and im-
mense, gleaming fangs. It . . . hopped, once, to-
ward her. Only then did the Ophirean cry out and
back away—

A hand set itself between her shoulder blades,
and she was thrust violently forward.

"NO!" That from behind her; she recognized
the baron's voice and though her brain was no
longer working well, she knew gratitude that it
could not have been he who pushed her.

"Hold, you fool!" the other man snapped.
"Move from this circle and you too will d—"

That was all Nateela heard. The thing blotted
out all vision with the blackness of an utterly
moonless, starless night, and then all sound too,
and, after an instant of agony, all feeling as well;
for it tore her in half before it ate her.

The Khitan had clamped a hand on one arm of the baron while he renewed the voicing of incantations. Abruptly the horrid thing vanished forever from the domain of Baron Sabaninus. Of Nateela there remained only the few splashes of blood the demon or Dark God had not had time to lap up, ere Khi Zang sent it back into whatever gulf of dreadful darkness it habited.

And then Baron Sabininus, too, vanished.

The man who stood where he had been wore the baron's clothing, but on this erect, far younger man neither leggings nor jupon hung loose. Holding his arms crooked at the elbows, he stared at the hands he turned and turned before his face. Then his eyes lifted, to stare over his fingers at the Khitan.

"Ishtar's curls—I see you clearly!"

"And I see you clearly, Sergianus!"

"Every feature . . . oh ye gods! Oh Lady Ishtar of my fathers . . . I am I . . . and I am not!"

"I see what a mirror would show you," the man from Khitai said. "A man of thirty, tall and straight. Chest and calves bulge with firm young muscle that tunic can barely contain. A shock of rich brown hair from which the morrow's sun will strike glints of red. A face far from homely and far from old, and keen young eyes. None will know you!"

"Ish . . . tar . . ."

"The goddess of that ivory image in your room of office? Only she might recognize you now! Remember that horses await. They await . . . whom?"

"Me! No—I mean yes. Aye! The horses await Sergianus, my nephew—the nephew of Baron





Sabininus of Korveka. Sergianus . . . I am Sergianus!"

"So are you then, my young lord Sergianus." Khi Zang's sweeping gesture encompassed more than the dim-lit subterranean chamber. "Nothing interests or keeps us here, Sergianus. Let us away—a queen awaits!"

"Aye!"

And Nateela was forgot in that instant. "Aye!" Sergianus repeated in a strong voice that was at once mature and far from old. "A queen awaits!"

Laughing, trembling not with palsy but in excitement, Sergianus strode to the steps and mounted them. The smiling yellow wizard from Khitai followed. He closed the door behind them.

The snowy ball of the moon moved but little before they were mounted. Accompanied by two young men whose ambition and greed would make them trustworthy long enough, they rode eastward across the nighted barony. Behind them they led, strangely, but two sumpter-beasts. All four men wore daggers, though only Khi Zang and Sergianus bore swords.

Eventually one of them would part to travel, somehow, the thousands of miles to his home, there to wait years for the accomplishment of his goal in Khauran: the future transplantation of a ghastly god from the dark mists of Khitai's ancientmost history. Of the other three, but one would complete the journey to the capital of Khauran of the Unhappy Queens. By that time, three would have died for his dream.

**CONAN
THE
MERCENARY**



1.
DEATH
IN
SHADIZAR

The tall youth walked the nighted streets lithe as a jungle cat on the hunt. The fingers of his big hands remained slightly curled, ready to draw sword or dagger or both. His eyes moved constantly in an effort to spy out the darkest shadows, pools of squid's ink on this poorly-lit street on the perimeter of the city's Watch-patrolled areas. For all his height and powerfully-constructed bulk, he moved almost silently. Eyes watched him from well back within a hallway dark as a well at midnight; the footpad appraised his probable lack of wealth, sized him up, and let the big youth pass.

The young man crossed that perimeter then, reaching the corner of Bazaar Way and, without hesitation, turning left into the Street of Erlik Enthroned. It was both narrower and darker.

The moment he'd rounded the corner, he grunted at impact of a rushing body. A lissome young woman had run full into him. Sleek and slippery, she jiggled wildly in a few strips of scarlet-dyed homespun and shameless gauze sewn with copper coins too small to tempt any but the very lowest of thieves. Her light panting and wild eyes told him she'd been running though not for long, all silent on bare, filthy-soled feet. His arms did not go around her; with a hand on each of her upper arms, he pushed her gently back a pace to look into her face.

"Here girl, where—"

Despite his big hands on her arms, the chestnut-skinned easterner writhed away, ducked, and hurried on past him. The youth did not even turn. With a little snort and a whimsical jerk of his head, he walk on. His hand left his dagger and his

eyes squinted as he scanned upper story windows.

"Boy! Ho there, big one!"

He half turned to look back. A slim hunting panther to his black-maned lion, the girl stood in the center of the intersection, where it was safest. Her hands rode bare hips and she faced him.

"Don't go that way unless you don't mind blundering into someone else's trouble!"

A young male addressed a young female: "You think I'm wearing this sword to pare my toenails?"

She snorted and tossed her head so that purplish-black hair flew. "Huh! No, and you're big enough. It's just that smart folk avoid others' troubles, and you're headed for some. Three or four blades, at least. Where came you by that barbarous accent?"

"Not on the other side of the Vilayet like you, girl." He glanced around, a broad-shouldered near-giant whose massive chest strained the cloth of a tunic not made for him. He was bronzed by the sun and the tunic was the color of desert sand. "Why warn me?"

He was wary, and justifiably. He knew Arenjun well, and Shadizar's reputation was little better. Such a helpful and tempting young woman could easily be distracting his attention whilst a silent confederate stole upon him with cudge or club or worse. He saw no one. The Street of Erlik Enthroned was quiet and apparently untenanted. The cult's adherents either did not meet this night in that big building they had converted into a temple, or they were quiet about the conducting

of their rites.

She shrugged. It was a jerky gesture, boyish save for the movement it imparted to her bosom, which was more bared than clothed; less clothed than adorned. Homespun and gauze indeed; she was poor as a temple cockroach!

"I ran into you, and you didn't grab me or try to pin me up against a wall. Why not?"

"Not because I did not find you attractive," he said, perhaps hopefully, for the city was new to him and she was comely. "Show me the way to a place to get better acquainted, then."

Her reply was a scornful chuckle. "You haven't that which attracts me, fellow!"

"I'm a year or so older than you, and strong enough to protect such a girl as you!" Even as his chest swelled a bit, he checked again down the Street of Erlik Enthroned. It remained empty, in the darkness.

"Huh! So are scores of others, hill-boy, and all with big hot hands that want to roam like stray dogs! It's good coin that I require."

"Go your way then, and find a fat grease-headed merchant with coins to spend on a girl so poor she can't afford silk. I require good coin too."

She started to say something else—perhaps to remind him that he was bent in a way opposite the city's moneyed area—but changed her mind. With another of those interesting shrugs and a toss of her long thick hair, she turned and padded away along Bazaar Way, toward the sprawling inner city plain that made up the Bazaar. He noted that she contrived to add an exaggerated sway and grind to her girlish hips.

"Women," he muttered, in the manner of a man

of experience, and he disregarded her advice. He resumed his prowling away from the better-lighted, patrolled area. He knew this city was wicked. Perhaps he was, too. He was confident.

The capital of Zamora was not idly called the City of Wickedness, Conan mused.

In the Bazaar that was the city's culmination of the great caravan route called Road of Kings, every commodity was available from produce to baubles both of stone and metal and flesh and blood. Above that sprawling market flanked by stalls and shops with brightly striped awnings, every manner of vice was readily available and even hawked like goods—for a price. Most of the vices were exotic and unbridled; the prices were high. No matter how curious he waxed, no matter how tempted by his eyes and the murmurs of extolling hawkers—and tales told in his inn—Conan eschewed the expensive esoterica of Shadizar the Wicked.

True, the strapping, almost hulking youth was a man of property, with two horses in a guarded stable behind the inn. Yet he cherished those possessions; they were hard-gained. Nor was his business in Shadizar to spend. Conan had other business. It involved his soul . . . and profit, rather than expenditures.

Having set up as a thief in Arenjun once he'd worked his way down here from the hills of Cimmeria, he had just spent the better part of two months to little profit. Indeed, he had suffered the loss of not only that fraction of his life, but of a prized part of himself as well. Though blessed with an easygoing barbarian insouciance and the open-eyed optimism of his few years, he was

hardly the happiest person in Shadizar of Zamora, or without cares.

He had come here with ambivalent hopes and goals. While he cherished a desire to gain audience with the sorcerer-ridden king, he sought too to vanish. He'd soon learned that the lord King of Zamora was not seen by some foreign youth without the laying out of a good deal of money to various intermediaries in fine robes. Too, he had not needed to investigate or query to know that he could not long afford to stay in the Upper City. He found lodgings on the other side of the bazaar, in that area of the walled capital known as the Desert. He stopped at the inn under the sign of the Foaming Jack, as often called the Leering Jackal.

This night, as on the night before, he prowled.

His pacing was not aimless; Conan moved ever uptown, out of the Desert. Why then had he turned down Erlik Enthroned? He was not certain. Here were companions, and anonymity unto invisibility, but no real attractions for an ambitious thief. And so he must be, to gain the wherewithal to bribe the robed slime that oozed between king and those who hoped to gain his ear.

The winding, narrow streets of the Lower City were dim even by day. The dingy human-constricted caves shadowing them were tenanted by refugees from the authorities and angry rulers of a dozen lands and other cities and city-states. Here were thieves whose activities had made other abodes far too unhealthy for their continued tenancy and newly-bearded mercenaries and deserters (or newly shaven, had they worn beards afore) fighting off the shakes ere they sought new employment; here brooded shadowy, unworthy

temples of a score of cults whose adherents would be unwelcome in most of the rest of the world. The cults of Shadizar were often artificial, manufactured to feature and support various vices in lascivious rites. In the Desert, night-companions ranged in age from the just-nubile to time-ravaged, pitifully old whores. They swayed among cultists and pleasure-seekers and the merely curious drawn by Shadizar's reputation; and deviants, refugees, and outlaws of every ilk and persuasion, predilection, and unrepentant reputation. Cut-purses and armed bullies prowled the streets and infested hallways dark as their souls. So too did cult-shills, temptresses and others: women of all ages more than ready to sell themselves by the hour, or for the time necessary to travel elsewhere with a protector strong of thews, or purse, or guards and reputation. For many who remained in the City of Wickedness were not all that happy; they just could not or dared not seek to betake themselves somewhere else.

Last night the big Cimmerian youth had said nay to nine women (one of whom was sixty if she was a day, while another was surely not yet nubile), four boys, and two men. One of the latter pair had been so obstreperously insistent that he had had to be refused with vehemence and finally with strength. "You should be flattered!" he had told Conan, who wasn't.

During the course of the same evening Conan had heard described the most abominable rites of the Temple of Set-Ishtar Reformed and United, and the unequivocally voluptuous ones of the Temple of Derketa Cloaca. Too, he had seen a

swaggering big Nemedian mercenary neatly and swiftly knifed by a boy of no more than thirteen, and him face to face with his victim. Later Conan witnessed the upending and sound spanking, in a public inn, of a young woman attired first in wisps of violently red silk and then in nothing save her brace of bangles. Afterward she was tossed—aye, literally: tossed—easily to two somber, black Stygians who swiftly hauled the blonde to their dingy quarters.

Conan had eschewed involvement. This was solemn resolve. He was here on important business: theft, and the regaining of his soul. He would not involve himself in the problems of others. And he would have care as to whom he sought to rob!

He had been too much involved in too much of late. A few too many persons down in Arenjun desired his company if not companionship. Events and his own straightforwardness had resulted in his reducing Arenjun's sorcerous population by two, and in destroying both their abodes. Ensconced in the Mall where thieves held revel by night—which in Arenjun was only a lawless section, while it seemed to comprise half of Shadizar the Wicked—he had got word of those who sought him.

There were men of the City Watch, of whose number he had slain one, wounded another, and destroyed both dignity and commission of an officer, all on one night some two months ago. The former prefect and his friends quietly sought the huge hillman with his smoldering blue eyes and short temper. So did uniformed men of the Watch, and one un-uniformed agent. Next came intelli-

gence that a trousered, khilat-wearing man of far Iranistan was also asking guarded and knowledgeable questions as to a certain Cimmerian youth's habits and whereabouts.

At that point Conan decided that Arenjun had grown lamentably small.

With his new possessions, he had departed the city by night. He rode north to Shadizar. He could have brought a willing female friend; Conan did not share her willingness.

Oddly, he had taken a longish route, avoiding the Road of Kings that directly connected the two Zamoran cities.

Though Shadizar was the capital and its gate sentries supicious, few questions were asked of anyone by anyone, once a newcomer was within the walls. Too many here had too much to conceal; "Best not to ask, lest one be asked," was a common phrase in Shadizar. In Arenjun one never knew who was plotting and who might be deadly danger. In Shadizar, one assumed: all plotted, all were lovers of vice and probably bent on wickedness. Conan preferred Shadizar. It was not difficult for him to be on his guard at all times.

Walking now that city's nighted streets, he smiled grimly. Purely as practice, he let his right hand dart across his muscular midsection to snatch out his sword. It sheared the air before him within a second, and he returned the blade to its oiled home with another smile. All in the space of a few heartbeats.

"Nothing worth stealing here," he muttered, in a sound that approached a growl, from the throat. "Best head back uptown."

He had come out of the affair of the Eye of

Erlík—which was not finished—and of the mage Hisarr Zul—who was—with some small wealth. He had left the wizard's burning keep with several weapons and a bolt of good cloth, hastily snatched. Too, he had acquired two horses and a like number of camels, along with a few stolen goods from far Samara. The horses remained. A youngish girl of astonishing skills and an older, far more crafty woman of Arenjun had assisted the youthful mage-slayer in relieving himself of the surly camels and the silver they brought, along with a few other items. He was left with memories and a new philosophy concerning women, and a vow he honestly believed he would keep, as had many a youth and man before him.

The guards at Shadizar's gates and the proprietor of the Foaming Jack had accounted for the rest of the Samaratan booty (which Conan had gained as a result of defending himself against their possessor, who had stolen them). And now he had been in the City of Wickedness for two days.

For two nights, departing his inn just after sundown, he had wandered the Zamoran capital.

He had not been challenged. Though obviously a youth with his erect posture, smoothly muscled arms and face free of lines, he was nevertheless manifestly formidable. The sheath of worn shagreen leather at his left hip was not new. It showed wear. The hilt standing from it was not ornamented, hinting at a serviceable sword. Neither was there ornamentation on the bone handle of his dagger. A glance into his eyes, a swift appraisal of his posture, his gait, his roving gaze, his huge, ready hands and their thick wrists

below extraordinary biceps; these told potential accosters they were better advised to seek prey elsewhere. Something about this young man bespoke that the dagger had been used on meat other than cooked. Surely the sword would be sharp, and wielded with expertise and power, and had in past been wiped of scarlet smears.

Conan was reconnoitering, seeking. He was about his business.

Part of that business was stealing, and he felt himself above mere footpads and cut-purses. He was swift, and could climb and be stealthy. An integral part of his chosen profession involved sniffing, observing, reconnoitering in the manner of a good general or military spy. He would be both, eventually; just now he was not quite eighteen, and still learning.

He was an agile and facile thief who had learned a certain wariness and cleverness—not without cost. Certainly he wished he'd never sought to rob the Elephant Tower of Yara the priest or the keep of Hisarr Zul the wizard!

He reached the end of the Street of Erlik Enthroned, and now he saw that which the nameless girl had fled, and warned him against.

Why the cross-street was called Khauran he did not know; who owned the decorated and curtained litter resting against the far northwest wall he could not say. Nor did he care. He knew not whether the litter was occupied—or if it were, whether that person was alive or dead, wounded or swooned. Conan did know that the foreigner who had himself carried about this part of the city at night was stupid: two men had borne the litter while one guarded. In the Desert of the Lower

City, three were not enough, and doubly so when two of them were not trained men of weapons.

One bearer was down, twitching in his blood when Conan came upon the scene. The other fled up Khauran Way in the manner of one who'd not even pause for breath until he was somewhere in the eastern hills of Brythunia, Zamora's northward neighbor.

None of the four attackers pursued him. Three beset the mailed, helmeted guard, who'd got his back against a wall and was sweeping his sword in horizontal figure-eights low enough to keep from being skewered. He could not maintain that rapid exertion forever, and his assailants knew it. Now the fourth was leaving the body of the downed bearer, to join them. He carried a trencherman's dagger and another; the second had a blade as long as his forearm. It dripped. Two of the others had swords, no matter that such were so expensive; the fourth, to the beleaguered guard's right, was also armed with two daggers.

"Never mind," one of the attackers told the fourth. "We have him—just drag the rabbit out of its burrow and start stripping it of jewels. If it resists—see if it bleeds! Uh!"

The speaker had said too much, partially turning his head toward his companion of the bloody dagger. No poor fighter, the guard swiftly altered his sweeping defense just enough, advanced one foot just enough, to send the first inch of his blade slicing through the man's throat. He staggered back, unable to speak, and dropped his weapon to clutch his neck. It was leaking badly. Making hideous gargling noises, the man continued to stagger away. Conan watched him sag.



I salute you, warrior, the Cimmerian thought, and decided it was time he took a stranger's advice and followed her back up toward the Upper City.

It was then that the man with the bloody dagger laid hand on the curtains concealing the litter's interior. A beringed and braceleted wrist flashed from within. The thief cried out in shock and pain as his hand was slashed by the short blade of a dagger whose jewels flashed even in the dimness of the street and the flickering light of a pole-set lamp.

A woman, Conan realized—and one of wealth! That bracelet was of gold. Even so it was gem-set, and the rings were surely not glass. She even

stabbed at an attacker with a jeweled knife! To aid such a person might be more profitable than stealing—and surely little more dangerous, judging from the ragged appearance of the three assailants.

A complication arose even as the Cimmerian arrived at that intelligence. Bleeding from one hand, the thief clamped it against his tunic while he obviously prepared to send his long blade stabbing through the curtain into the litter.

What Conan bawled out did not matter; perhaps it was “KAWAAAH!” or somesuch. Only the sound was important, and he was on the move even as he shouted. Naturally, the man beside the litter interrupted his activity to look around.

He saw six or so feet of broad-shouldered, thickly muscled man rushing at him, black hair blowing about his head. His long sword was carried at the waist with wrist turned slightly outward. Even so the fellow was foolish enough to stand and meet that rush, and it was necessary that Conan strike twice rather than once. The first blow clanged his swordblade against the other's dagger with such force that the man grunted in pain and the weapon went flying to clang off a stone wall, striking sparks, and clunk to the street. There it skittered and fetched up against the wall's base with another clang.

Conan's second stroke was in truth merely the backswing of the first: it sliced the man open from right hip to left. The thief hadn't even dropped to his knee ere Conan was swinging away, knowing him done, and turning his icy-eyed gaze on the other two thieves.

Neither had as yet got past the guard's

defense—which, Conan was impressed to note, was not yet faltering. Nor had either been so much as wounded.

“Which one shall I run through from behind?”

The horrible question was snarled in Conan’s most vicious gutturals. Had there been twenty with their backs to him, all must have turned. One of the attackers was wise enough to skip several paces aside while he turned; the other forgot all and twisted his head about to snatch an over-the-shoulder look.

Once again the litter’s guard saw opportunity, and swiftly took it. In truth it was beautifully done; he took this man just as he had the other, with the very tip of his blade across the throat. It was enough; bone and vital artery were opened, and another man gushed blood onto the street called Khauran.

Grinning like a snarling wolf, Conan pounced to within three feet of the other, showing the guard his unprotected left side. He stared into the eyes of a sword-wielding thief in a dirty brown tunic—who had set out this night with three companions and was now ineffably alone.

“See to your employer,” Conan said, without taking his gaze off his chosen foe.

“Ha!” The thief, a Kothian sure, struck at Conan, who sidestepped and watched the sword rush past. He watched the backstroke, too. It was awkward; the fellow had so little knowledge of combat that he began the necessary twisting of his wrist far too late. A fair enough thief, perhaps, Conan mused; but the fellow was a complete failure as a swordsman.

“You’d better run off,” the astonished Kothian

was told.

"Here, that's my business," the guard said. "I'm paid to—"

"Tonight," Conan snarled, staring at the thief but answering the guard, "you were paid to die by an employer too mean or too stupid to hire adequate protection for this part of town by day, much less at night! You were a *dead man*, She-mite; think on that! See to your heartless employer now, lest she cut herself on one of her precious damned jewels—hunh!"

The final grunt was occasioned by the remaining thief's attempt to take off Conan's head with a magnificent sweep of his sword. That all-out beheading stroke made the Kothian's blade a speeding horizontal stripe of silver.

Both Conan's knees bent to drop him straight down into a squat below the mighty cut. He heard the wind-noise of the rushing blade, too close above his head. And then Conan showed the Kothian thief why such a mighty cut was unwise, too great a risk. Straightening, the Cimmerian faced him and, before the now desperately begun backstroke was fair under way, stuck the man straight through the middle.

The backstroke was never completed. The Kothian's arm twitched and wavered; his eyes went huge while he sucked in an audible sobbing gasp. Backing mechanically off the cold sliver of steel that had opened his stomach and belly and those organs it found within, he thumped against a mud-brick wall. It alone supported him. Glowering, his chest heaving, Conan waited.

The man's arm dropped. Slowly the swordhilt eased from the grip of fingers going helpless. Just



as slowly, the Kothian thief of Shadizar slid down the wall. His head hung bowed while lifeless eyes stared at what came out of him, in shining bloody coils.

Conan paced over to his first foeman.

"Hurt?" the Cimmerian asked. "It will never heal, but you needn't die slowly, in stench and pain." He slew that man then, and wiped his sword with care on the hem of the corpse's tunic.

"Name of Ishtar," the guard said in a low voice. "You're a bloody one!"

Conan stared at a tall man, young and not unhandsome, in yellow-plumed helmet and a fine coat of Kothian mail, though he was no Kothian.

"It's called mercy," Conan said quietly, and sucked in a great breath to still his voice's slight quiver of excitement; adrenaline still flooded his system. "Is there no mercy in Shem? Would you leave a man to die slowly of so awful a wound, with his guts starting to stink with green rot and him screaming in agony and smelling his own death?"

It was then that a ring-bedizened hand swept aside the litter's curtain from within, and the hand's owner thrust forth her head to spew her vomit on the street. Conan stepped back two paces, mindful of the splash.





2.

EMPLOYMENT FOR A THIEF

Shaking his head, Conan glanced around. No one was astir on the streets of Khauran or Erlik Enthroned. Those within the buildings lining both avenues had heard the sounds of combat, and not only remained inside but had probably extinguished whatever glims they had lit. Naturally anyone who had been approaching was now heading precipitately in the other direction.

Again he looked down at the woman who hung out of the grounded litter. Now she dry heaved over the noisome pool that had been her dinner. Her appearance was most unusual indeed, even to Conan. He knew he had never been in her homeland, or seen another from there either.

Her black hair was so high-piled that he realized its glossy sheaves must be wrapped about a cone of some sort, perched atop her skull. Pearls were woven into the sheaves, and the star-like gleam of gems against hair black as the night sky meant they formed the heads of long pins. A carcanet of gold wire, cloth-of-gold, and what appeared to be a million pearls surrounded her neck and covered her upper chest. Its bilobate lower curves were carelessly trapped in a bandeau of white silk that revealed the flesh tints within. Her great heavy girdle was also jeweled, and supported a long and voluminous skirt of pale yellow, shockingly side-slit. The leg that emerged from the little chamber formed by framework, roof, and curtains atop the litter poles was handsome, and narrowed into a small foot shod in a gilded sandal. Its lifted heel clacked when she set it down. Gold wire pierced each of her earlobes to dribble two strands of four large pearls. The lobes were elongated from years of bearing such gemmy

weights, and the face that looked wanly up at Conan was that of a woman of perhaps twoscore years. It was a handsome face, rather than pretty, with fine cheekbones and startling eyes under long black lashes stiff with lacquer.

Both her arms were half-covered with jewels.

"One bearer fled," Conan blandly informed her, "and I'd say the other is dead. No wonder; you came down here wearing what looks like crown jewels, and guarded by only one man."

She gazed up at him from beneath those long stiff lashes. They glistened.

"Why . . . you're very young, aren't you."

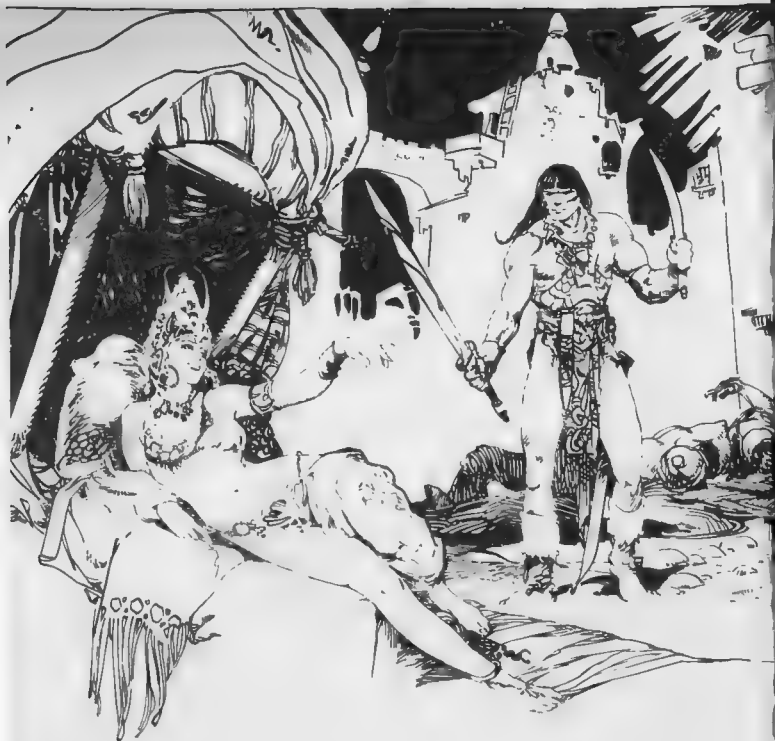
Conan stared whimsically at her. "That is what you have to say to me." He gave his head a jerk and looked at her bodyguard.

"Who are you?" that man asked.

"And that is what you have to say. You both live because I ignored a warning to avoid this area, and you can say only that I am young and unknown to you."

A movement caught his peripheral attention; he looked aside and down to see a hand extended up to him, a hand bearing four rings, though thumb and forefinger were bare. The nails were scarlet. Conan deliberately took his time sheathing his sword. Just when the extended hand started to waver, he took it and drew its owner up from her litter. Her Shemite guard was nigh as tall as Conan; even in her noisy heels, the woman was short. Perhaps all her people were, and thus the elaborate high coiffure.

"I am the Lady Khashtris, of Khauran. This is my personal guard, Shubal. And we are indeed very grateful to you. Tug my rings, and they will



come off."

"I am Conan, a Cimmerian. And I'll not strip your rings, Lady Khashtris."

She released his hand and used her other to strip the right of three of its four rings. She held them out in her fist; after a moment's hesitation, Conan accepted them as the price of her life.

"They are only baubles," she said. "You have saved my life, Conan, Cimmerian. Both our lives."

He opened his big fist to inspect its flashing,

faceted contents. "You mean these are not gold and silver set with a topaz, and a moonstone, and a ruby?"

"Oh yes, Conan, they are that. And now they are only tokens of gratitude. We came up from Khauran to purchase cosmetics and other goods from eastern lands. Though one of my guards lay ill, I was foolish enough to want to traverse this particular street—Khauran Way—ere we depart for home on the morrow. Another guard fled when this attack began. You did not see him, I suppose. I am not so heartless and greedy, you see. And Shubal is easily one of the two bravest men in Shadizar; he stood against four, which obviously meant his death. It would be my good fortune now if you were to be seeking employment, Conan, Cimmerian, at say twenty coins of the best silver for the next month, for then I should have both the bravest men in Shadizar to protect me from the lawless ruffians of this wicked city, of a land foreign to me and hardly so gentle as Khauran."

A bit long of wind and hyperbole, Conan thought—even while being charmed by Khashtris's pretty speech. In addition, she seemed sincere. It was only that she tended to speak at such length, he supposed. Khauran might be a land a man might swiftly tire of. Within a month, perhaps. . . . That she had cited his calling her heartless was nothing he saw as cause for embarrassment or concern. If she showed anger, he'd consider apology. She did not, and he did not.

"You are talking about employing us both," he said, noting the dark look given him by Shubal of Shem.



"Of course."

"And Shubal, who has seen me rewarded, of course has a reward coming also, as the bravest man in Shadizar."

The Lady Khashtris of Khauran nodded. "Of course. You are forward in all things, aren't you, Conan of . . . is it Cimmeria? Is that a city?"

"A country," Conan told her with studied aplomb, "north of Aquilonia . . . and the Border Kingdom. It is no more than twice Zamora's size," he added, exaggerating. "Is Khauran a city?"

The Shemite turned his face away lest his employer see his smile. In truth Cimmeria, Zamora, and Khauran could have been stuffed into sprawling Shem, with room to spare for Khoraja and perhaps more territory as well.

"A country," milady Khashtris said equably, "about half the size of Zamora—and I am sorry not to know your land, Conan. But why not see for yourself, and enlighten me as well. We leave for Khauran on the morrow. Will you join us, then?"

"I suppose I could get my affairs in order by . . . noon," Conan said, just as coolly. "I have a pair of horses . . . but my chaincoat is being repaired."

Khashtris of Khauran looked at him from beneath arched black brows and lacquered lashes. "We too have horses . . . and no bearers."

"You do not ride, Lady?"

"I do not." She looked at the litter, and back at her savior, who noted she had not lowered her eyes to sweep the corpses around them. "As for tonight . . ."

"Guardsmen to a noble lady," Conan advised, "do not of course carry litters. If you will walk,

though, I shall carry your chair." Stepping past his employer and ignoring her look of surprise, he lifted her empty conveyance with ease, and soon had it adjusted on one shoulder. "Shubal: Well met! No bad blood exists between Shem and Cimmeria and Khauran."

"Nor between us, Conan," the tall Shemite said, for his dark looks had vanished with Conan's affirming their co-employment and pushing Khashtris to promise a reward.

"Milady," Conan said, bending forward just a little and tilting rightward away from his load, "well met. Do we go now to your inn?"

"Shubal," she said, and then, "No, wait; do you follow with me betwixt you. I shall guide Conan. Will you join us, Conan?"

"I have my own accommodations," he said, realizing that he was surely in for considerable walking. While the Foaming Jack was but a few streets away, the noblewoman must be staying in the Upper City, in far finer surroundings.

They set off up the Street of Erlik Enthroned. Mailed, helmeted Shemite bodyguard; huge, bronzed, black-maned Cimmerian thief carrying a side-turned sedan chair; and between them the short, heavily bejeweled woman with heels that clack-clacked loudly at every step and elaborate coiffure that stood nearly a foot above her head.

When they reached better lighted areas they found others abroad. Most stared. None, however, challenged or interfered with the strange trio. And Conan was right; the inn at the sign of the Thirsty Lion was indeed far uptown, and he had a long walk back. He spent the rest of the evening squandering the topaz ring on a woman of

Shadizar with more paint and cheap jewelry than clothing or culture. Still, she was beyond girlhood, and Conan learned much from her. As she was charmed by his youth and massiveness—as well as the ring of real gold set with a real gem—the exchange was more than equal. Ring or no, bruises or no, both considered it a night well spent.

Next day Conan, who had no mailcoat at all, parted with Khashtris's ruby-set ring. Armor was not cheap. In addition to the mail-arrased, peaked Turanian helmet, huge white cloak, and a crotch-protector of woven chain over leather over cloth, he was able to purchase only a sleeveless mail-vest of no great length. Happy with the ring, the merchant made a to-do of adding a padded coat to be worn under the thirty pounds of linked chain.

Conan advised the pleased merchant that he also required two bearers for the litter of a smallish noblewoman; he did not name her nationality or their destination. The man swiftly procured two Ophirean brothers down on their luck. Conan spent a few minutes carefully questioning them and several more assuring each that lack of loyalty would result in their employer's having the unpleasant chore of wiping a lot of blood off his blades.

The mailcoat was new and the helmet had doubtless once adorned the head of a bluish-bearded man now dead. Conan liked them well enough. There was something manly in their weight and sheen.

He cut quite the figure and knew it, riding so

tall in his mail through Shadizar. He bestrode one horse while leading another, apparently accompanied by two retainers from the meadowlands of a nation whose knights oft wore gilded armor. These wore sleeveless shirts of saffron and of blue, breechclouts, long daggers, strapped sandals, and a good deal of hair.

Conan's chin tilted and his eyes automatically narrowed to appraise upper story windows. Stupid, he reminded himself. He was no longer a thief. He had a patron whose moonstone ring he wore on his left little finger; he was employed as guard to a noble lady. And what might he have done with himself otherwise? Broken into the so-called temple of Erlik Enthroned, where white kittens were turned red in sacrifice to the yellow-eyed god of death?

The edge of Conan's mouth twitched, though he did not quite smile.

Erlik.

His right hand rose to toy with the leathern cord about his neck. The amulet it supported, under tunic and haqueton and mail-vest, was nothing: a diamond-shape of molded clay or glazed pottery set with a bit of glass; a barbarian's amulet that any would assume furthered some northern superstition. Anyone could see that it was nothing, worthless.

Conan's mouth set grimly. Aye, a nothing . . . for which several had died including a mighty wizard, and which was sought after by the rulers of two several countries. The Cimmerian had cleverly disguised the valuable Zamboulán amulet called the Eye of Erlik. So it would remain, imbedded in hardened clay, until he decided

what to do with it, this thing he had of a sorcerer of Zamboula who was more lately of Arenjun . . . and still more lately deceased, with Conan's aid.

The Eye of Erlik, he mused. Well, just now it was of no importance to him or his needs. He had a far more serious need. It involved his very soul. His hand moved behind him, to touch the carefully-wrapped packet behind his saddle; apparently a leather-wrapped cushion in the Iranistani style. No cushion, surely, had ever been of such importance to any individual.

Thus reflected the Cimmerian while riding through Shadizar to the Thirsty Lion, accompanied by two he had employed on behalf of his new employer. With both one guard and one bearer having run off last night, Lady Khashtris was of no great competence at choosing men, he thought—without taking into consideration her employment of him.

At the inn, he found Khashtris disappointingly swathed in traveling robes of white and yellow. She and Shubal were ready to depart—with two new bearers they had contracted with. Both men were of Shadizar, though a parent of one had certainly come here by way of Stygia.

"Good," Conan said. "We will need four bearers, to spell each other. Let us hope they can fight too, if need be."

And that was that. He was outsized, and forceful, and not ill-favored; the Lady Khashtris was wealthy and inclined to accept his word, even considering his youth. He had after all saved her life, and was beautiful in helmet and that arm-baring jerkin of linked chain.

Conan asked, "And the guard who fled last

night?"

"Not a sign of the white-livered dog," Shubal said.

"Hmp! I'd not expected him to be here, to try to hire on again," Conan said and he and the Shemite exchanged a look and a tiny smile: two men of weapons who had downed four, they would inspect the hue of the coward's liver if ever they laid eyes on him.

Milady's other guard remained ill. He must remain here and travel home alone when he could. Khashtris had to be back, for her cousin awaited some of the goods she had purchased. Conan nodded, noting her four well-laden sumpter beasts. He appraised Shubal's horse, a handsome bay that would surely have been welcomed as mount by a knight of Aquilonia. The Cimmerian magnanimously announced that the off-duty bearers could take turns riding his sumpter-horse.

"Would be so much easier if women rode horses," he said, while he and Shubal assisted



Khashtris into her chair with its curtains of yellow, broidered with a red-fruited tree in green.

"A noble of Khauran does not bestride a horse," she said, with a natural austerity that was not sententious or insulting. She drew in a bare leg.

"Not even the men, Lady?"

"Only to battle," she assured him.

Conan nodded. "Lady . . . might one ask if the Noble Khashtris knows the King of Khauran?"

She sighed and her face took on an expression of pensive sadness. "Khauran of the Unhappy Queens has no king," she said. "The queen is daughter of my mother's sister."

Elation leapt up in Conan like a cool spring. Cousin to a queen! And the horrid theft perpetrated on him by Hisarr Zul could be righted only by one who wore a crown. Aye, so had said the mage; a crowned person, he had said, not king, or even man! Conan stared into her eyes and spoke most earnestly.

"Lady Khashtris, there is that which only your cousin can do for me. For her it is nothing; for me, everything. Aid me in that and I will return your ring and serve you half a year without wage." And he held out her moonstone-set ring of graven silver.



She could not miss the intensity of his gaze or tone.

"Why Conan . . . there is no need of such rash promises. I live today because of your bravery and sword-skill of last night. I will see that you meet my royal cousin, and I will intercede for you. You will tell me what it is that only she can do; queen of a land you heard of only yesterday?"

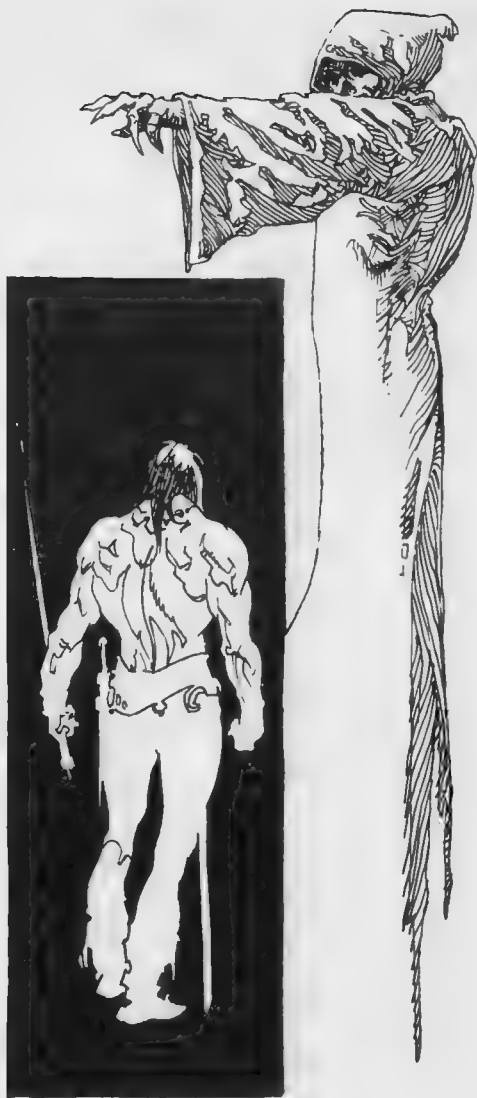
"Noble Lady, I will!"

And he caught up her hand to press the ring on her. Stepping back then, Conan saluted the surprised woman with the loyalty sign he had offered no one since that day over two years ago when, just before the attack on the invaders in Venarium, he had been proclaimed warrior.

He had far more reason than a few pieces of gold to protect the life of this woman; she represented the return of his soul!

And so the lady Khashtris, queen's cousin of Khauran, employed as bodyguard the son of a barbarian smith, and with a gesture he pledged her a depth of loyalty she'd not have accepted, had she known the sign. As it was, smiling, she turned in her seat and drew the curtain. She was lifted on the shoulders of all four bearers. Before rode the Shemite, Shubal; behind the litter paced five sumpter beasts, four laden, and behind all rode the giant in the arm-baring blued steel and the peaked Turanian helmet with its steel curtains that left bare only the forefront of his head and throat. The cavalcade paced through Shadizar and was soon passed through the south gate, onto the Road of Kings.

A bit later that afternoon, others followed.





3.

SWORDS IN THE DARK

Once they were on that broad caravan track called Road of Kings, Conan and Shubal rode just behind the litter. An off-duty bearer rode Conan's second horse and held the lead-rein of the first pack animal; the others docilely followed.

Shubal was of the *asshuri*, a Shemite warrior clan, Conan learned while the two men conversed. Soon they would swing west off the broad road, and into Kharan.

"Why 'of the Unhappy Queens'?" Conan asked.

"The curse. Long and long ago a queen of Khauran mated with a demon. I believe the result is assurance of royal fecundity and Khauran's continued independence, or some such; I am not sure. The blessing carried with it a curse: once in each century a queen gives birth to a demon-child, a witch. She is easily recognized by the crescent mark on her bosom."

"Every time, eh? What a belief!"

"Don't scoff, Conan. It's true. Each one is named Salome, after the first witch—and each is slain. Seven years ago, Queen Ialamis bore twin girls. One had the mark. She was given the dread name, and exposed to die on the desert. Princess Taramis, the witch's twin, does not know. She will be told during her Rite of Womanhood, in five or so years when she reaches age thirteen. Khauran's Queen Ialamis the Sad is a lonely and unhappy woman, widowed soon after she caused her own daughter to be slain. It is the dual curse of the queens of Khauran, for they seldom keep consorts long."

"Someone should console Ialamis that she has saved her daughter; the princess is at least spared any possibility of bearing a demon! And who do

the queens of Khauran wed, then?"

Shubal said, "Strong and brave men!"

And they rode on, with Conan reflecting dolorously on the unhappy woman whose aid he so needed. They met a large caravan, and toward sundown a squad of uniformed horsemen, Zamoran soldiers, passed them. Later still, Conan cursed when a couple of youngsters galloped past, exciting his and Khashtris's beasts and raising a cloud of yellowish dust. They departed the road then, to make camp.

One horse bore tents; they set them up so that Conan and Shubal shared one and the four bearers another, while Khashtris had the tall green one to herself. They were on their way again shortly after sunrise.

Eventually the small cavalcade was pacing into the rich farmlands of little Khauran. Khashtris avowed that the very air was sweeter now, and had her curtains open. She even emerged now and again to walk for a space. Conan kept careful track of which bearer's turn it was to ride, and he and Shubal were not unhappy at having nothing else to do but watch the flash of their lady's fine legs.

On one of his employer's emergences from her litter, Conan dismounted to walk beside her.

"It is fine fertile country you are blessed with, Lady."

"Aye Conan—and just hear the birds! See how the farmfolk smile and wave when we pass. All are happy in Khauran . . ." And she stopped suddenly, frowning.

"Except the queen herself," Conan said.

"Aye."

"Shubal has told me of the Curse of Khauran's Queens. Would that I could break it, Lady, for you."

"Think you so much of me, Conan?"

"You are certainly neither insensitive nor heartless, Lady Khashtris! I admit I'd defend you against odds, though, because of your promise to present me to the queen, with my petition."

"Will you tell me of it now?"

"Aye, in brief. In Arenjun, I fell afoul of a certain mage, Hisarr Zul," Conan said, seeing no reason to mention that he had been engaged in trying to rob the mage at the time, and had fallen into a trap. "He stole from me my very soul. I—"

"Your soul?" Khashtris was incredulous.

Conan glanced around, then at the plump cushion behind his saddle. "Aye, just so. I think I've not smiled since, nor known a perfect night's sleep. My . . . soul is encased in a mirror. Thus the mage forced me into a mission for him. In the course of that I succeeded in laying a ghoulish ghost, a sand-lich on the desert between Arenjun and Zamboula. From that thing I learned the means of causing Hisarr Zul's death. When I returned he sought to slay me, but I turned his own poison-dust back on him. He is dead. My soul, my very essence, remains trapped in the mirror. He could have removed it, but I had to slay him or die myself. If the mirror is broken, I am soulless, yet alive. I have seen such creatures: such served the wizard, and I had rather be dead and eaten by vultures! Yet if the mirror is broken by a crowned ruler . . . my soul is returned to me. So said the sand-lich, who had been Hisarr's brother, and murdered by him."

"Oh, Conan! Ishtar and Ashtoreth—how horrible!" Khashtris paused to turn to him, her elaborate coiffure spiring high as his forehead. "Would that I wore a crown, that I might make you whole, my poor unfortunate! My cousin will end your torment, though, on our arrival. There is no doubt or question, Conan. It will be done."

And now you know, my most attractive lady of twoscore years, why I would defend you against Old Set himself, Conan mused, and returned to his horse that he might be in better position were he needed as mercenary bodyguard, rather than companion.

He was not so needed, that day.

That night, Conan awoke to sounds that should not have existed. He knew what he had heard. Though Shubal lay a few feet away, breathing heavily in sleep, Conan elected to make no sound. He rose silently. Without taking time to don padded shirt or mail-vest, he buckled his weapons-belt over his breechclout with a silence few would have believed. Just as silent, he crept from the tent. Even thumping Shubal with his foot might bring the man awake with a cry or a groan, and someone outside was most interested in stealth. Conan adopted the same measure.

No more than ten good paces separated Khashtris's tent from his and Shubal's. Beyond it and angled a bit so as to form a triangle, the bearers' tent loomed against the night sky. He was just able to distinguish men there—and another less than five paces from him, his back to Conan. This one bent over still another, and a slender blade dripped on the fallen form. Conan knew he had

heard a muffled yelp of pain or dying. The moonlight brought a glitter to upturned, glazed eyes, and Conan recognized one of the Ophirean bearers he had employed.

The Cimmerian crept forward like a stalking panther.

Seconds later there were two corpses on the ground. The man Conan had just slain was one of the bearers hired by Khashtris; he had murdered the Ophirean. Crouching, a snarl twisting his face, the Cimmerian peered about. The other four had not heard this killing. They were moving, very stealthily, upon Khashtris's tent.

Conan made instant decision, faded around his own tent, and came in behind Khashtris's, so that it was between him and the skulkers. Four, eh? Someone had followed them, then—someone in league with the two litter bearers the lady had employed. Now Conan squatted behind Lady Khashtris's tent. Moments later the fabric was neatly slit.

The queen's cousin awoke with a huge hand covering her lower face from cheek to cheek, from nose to chin. Her struggle was stilled by a brief whisper:

"It's Conan. Be still."

With her heart pounding and her mouth covered and his brawny arm a heavy pressure on her breast, the high-coiffed lady waited in the darkness, and wondered whether she was being protected or menaced. The darkness and silence had become horror, so that her heartbeat sounded like the tympani of a marching army. She felt the swift beat of his heart too, beneath the massive chest bare against her bare back.



The flap of her tent was drawn aside from without, to admit a pallid pool of moonlight. A stooping man entered as if walking on eggs. Another. Another, bearing a sword. Conan thrust his noble employer roughly from him as he rose. In the silence and the darkness of the tent his snarled words were as a ferocious growl to freeze the limbs of any skulking murderers.

"What seek you, murdering dogs? Death?"

And he pounced one step to strike such a blow as he'd never have risked against sighted foes. He could see dimly, and they had just entered the tent and surely could not; he risked. His sword clove meat and a man groaned horribly. Instantly Conan was twisting his blade free of its victim's flesh and muscle. He pounced aside then, and there came the sound of a falling body.

"Who—who struck? Baranthes?"

"I struck, slimy dog. You've come to do murder—do it!" The voice was as much animal growl as human, and the skin of Khashtris horripilated no less then that of the two men.

"Son of Set—it's that Conan!"

This time Conan said nothing; squatting, he extended his sword and swung. The arm was two feet long, to the wrist; the sword it wielded added nearly three feet more of reach. When the rushing edge struck, no groan arose; a man howled hideously in the dark as his calf was chopped more than half through. Even while he toppled, the silent Conan moved again, this time with unerring instinct toward Khashtris. Leaning toward the tent's flap, he chopped down toward the floor as if seeking to split a fallen log. His blade did not reach the ground, but was arrested by a semi-

yielding bulk. The ugly bubbling sound from a human throat told him he had found either lung or neck of the man he had already crippled: a treacherous litter-bearer from Zamora by way of Stygia.

Conan did not care which; he twisted free his steel and lunged rightward.

The *whish* he heard to his left was the third man's sword; did the fellow know he was now without companions?

"Best flee, slime," Conan told him, growling low. "You are all alone. I've slain three this night, and both Shubal and Khashtris live!"

Rather than accept sensible advice, the man struck wildly. Conan was already amove. With a loud chopping sound, the would-be murderer drove his sword into the tent's single pole with such force that he groaned at impact. The pole crumpled.

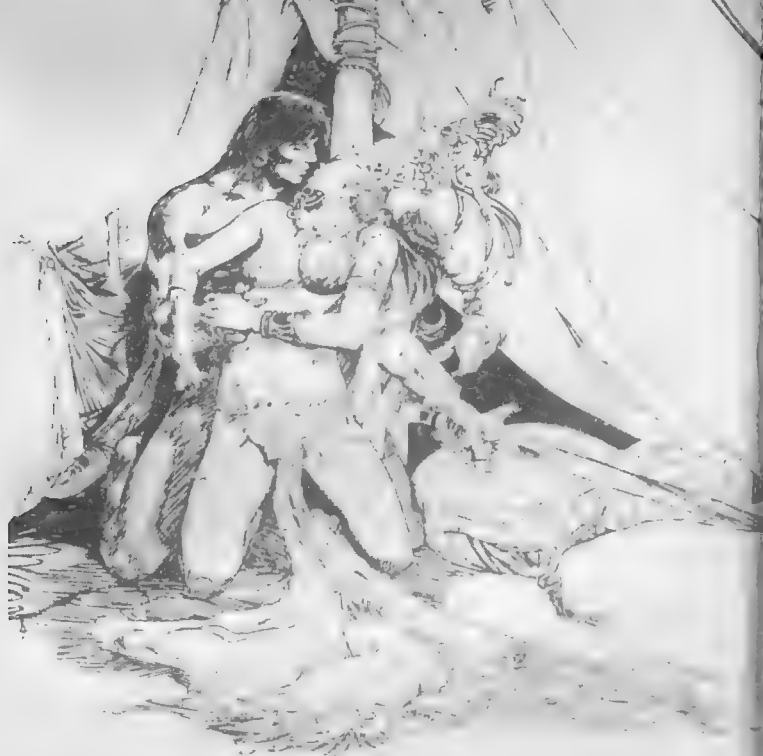
As the tent came down over them and Khashtris squeaked in terror, Conan pounced. He did not stab another unseen foe in the dark; he found an arm, which he broke, and then a neck. He broke it, too.

The Cimmerian stood alone, with the sagging tent draped over him so that he formed a human pole in a darkness that was absolute. The third stalker of Khashtris lay at his feet. Again the lady of Khauran made a squeaky, whimpering sound.

"There were three," Conan said, and forced his way toward her voice, and squatted. The tent fell over them. Grasped by a shivering Khashtris, Conan held her close, and remained. Hardly old, the woman was nevertheless more than twice his







age. But no woman, Conan learned, was old, in darkness.

Just at dawn a horrified Shubal hauled the tent away, and stared. Conan showed him an animal's ugly grin.

"Good morning, Shubal. You do sleep soundly." The Cimmerian waved casually with a hand whose little finger wore a band of silver set with a moonstone. "Drop the tent again, will you? Just for a few moments."

Unable to speak though his mouth was open, Shubal did. Conan reared up to form a human tentpole, while the Lady Khashtris hastily clothed herself.





4.
**SOUL
OF
THE
CIMMERIAN**

Conan, Shubal, and Lady Khashtris occupied a camp in which they were the only humans alive—though they now possessed two additional horses, bridled and saddled. All four bearers lay dead, the Ophireans murdered and the two hired by Khashtris slain by Conan. One lay under the woman's collapsed tent; the other two men there were unknown to Conan.

They were known to Khashtris and Shubal. The corpses were of her other two bodyguards, he who had been "ill" and he who had fled the thieves' attack in Shadizar.

"These two plotted it," Conan mused aloud. "Both of you and your bearers were to die. Perhaps these dogs made agreement with those thieves of Shadizar, or hired them. You travel with too much wealth and not enough protection, Khashtris." He had called her by name without giving it a thought; Shubal noted, but made no comment. The noblewoman did not so much as compress her lips. "That failed, and so they put two likely bearers in your way. You hired them—"

"Foolishly!" Khashtris said, in bitter self-accusation.

"Aye, foolishly," Conan said, as though she were not his noble and wealthy employer. "The two traitors followed us. Those tik-nuts the Stygian half-breed gave Shubal were a drug, or drugged. I didn't like the things, but he didn't know I'd spat them out, for I had no desire to insult him. I spat about ten times more to rid my mouth of their foul brown taste! Both Shubal and I were to sleep through your murder and robbery.

Who can be sure why they first slew the Ophirean bearers?"

"Ishtar damn me for a fool!" Shubal blurted. "Beat me with your sword, Conan!"

"Better we both beat our employer for hiring only two trustworthy men—and four treacherous midden-heap rats! Better still, let us beat no one or our breasts either, but be on our way. Men have died afore, and I have killed afore. I reckon I will again. I may even make a mistake or two, some day. My noble lady: this time we leave that silly chair-on-poles. You will ride like a human and not a priest of Set, or you will walk while Shubal and I ride. Crom's name, we now have eight horses! Shall I tie you to one, or help you to mount?"

She gazed at him, large-eyed and blinking. "I—I've never—my legs—"

"The legs of Noble Khashtris are better than those of any girl of fifteen or of twenty! Come, be human; be a wench, for once! You might enjoy it."

Khashtris stared at him, and chewed her lip, and then suddenly she was smiling.

Thus rode the three into the walled city of Khauran, capital of Khauran, and along its broad main thoroughfare. All bestrode good mounts, and Khashtris sat tall with much display of fine bare leg. People stared; the noble lady held high her chin and her brows, and looked straight before her.

Between marble-walled structures the trio rode, leading five other horses. One was laden with the weapons of dead men. Conan was no stripper of

corpses, but neither was he one to leave good weapons lying about to rust or fall into the hands of farm children.

They rode to a home of greenish marble and black pillars near the palace, and here was the Lady Khashtris made welcome by her household. A restive Conan suffered himself to be bathed while his armor and tunic were dusted. Nothing here was large enough to fit the Cimmerian, who clad himself again in the same tunic, over which he drew his padded jack and new shirt of mesh-mail. His lady employer still was not ready. He occupied the time of waiting in the downing of a huge cup of wine and the hurling of japery at Shubal, who wore a silver-bordered tunic of snowy white and a brocaded short-cloak for which Conan saw no purpose.

Once Khashtris had bathed and been coiffed anew and clothed, she appeared—and at once pointed out how filthy Conan's voluminous white cloak was. Rather than wear a cape such as Shubal's—who was smirking—Conan doffed the travel-soiled garment and refused to don the one she proffered.

Lady Khashtris and her bodyguards went to the palace, where a messenger had already carried word of her coming.

Many eyes watched the strapping near-giant with the hot blue eyes and the mop of square-trimmed black hair as he accompanied his gemmed employer and fellow bodyguard to the lofty structure housing Khauran's royalty. Despite the popularity of beards in Khauran, Conan had scraped his face smooth. The new mail-vest had been polished, and shone. Though its owner

had slain four since purchasing it, the armor had yet to turn a blade or be blood-splashed.

Through the lofty marble halls of the palace they paced, accompanied by the clack-clack of Khashtris's shoes. Her yellow skirts rustled. Past doors arabesqued in gold they walked; past bronze-cuirassed guards who seemed to see nothing; past servants whose eyes rounded while they stared at the trio; by all these they passed in silence. They came to two tall doors plated with silver. On them some watery-eyed fellow had doubtless spent a year of his life inditing various scenes from the past of the Ashkaurian dynasty.

Khashtris was expected. She hardly gave the annunciator time to call out her name before she swept within. Conan followed her into a large chamber of pennon-hung walls of pink marble veined with red and gray, tiled floor strewn with carpets brought from the east, and an impressive number of burning lamps in ornate cressets of brass enhanced with gold and onyx.

Here were no guardsmen. Here were gathered six adults and a child of six or so years, who was gowned like a miniature queen. Her Conan saw but briefly, as she departed the audience chamber in the company of her nurse. He gave her but a glance: the child-sister of a dead witch, her hair black as that of her Cousin Khashtris's, though not piled and teased up into the Khaurani cone.

Cousin or no, Khashtris genuflected to the woman seated on the dais carpeted in scarlet. Just behind their employer, Conan and Shubal bowed.

The woman on the throne of Khauran bore signal resemblance to her cousin. Her black hair was coiffed identically to Khashtris's, if more ornately





dressed; so was the hair of every noblewoman of this land. The queen's crown surrounded her high-spiring hair and its gems, yellow and smoky topaz, twinkled as if winking at Conan. Only her face and palms and fingers were unclothed; the youngish woman was draped in a pile of brocaded velvet and shining satin of rich hues. As to her form Conan could be sure only that she was of a broad-hipped plumpness.

High of forehead, the queen of Khauran affected tiny lines of eyebrows that were hardly the preference of the barbaric hillmen of cold Cimmeria. He liked her wine-colored lips well enough, and her fine nose with its thin wings, even as he saw that her face was that of no happy woman.

Her attire was magnificent. Broirdery of cloth-of-gold flowed inward from her shoulders in arabesque loops to the high collar of her bodice of mauve velvet, and up onto the high, stiffened collar. Bare round arms flashed from sleeves slashed from shoulder to wrist; each was cleverly caught just above the elbow by a few stitches and encircling bands of beaten gold. Thence each sleeve flowed down into a tight cuff that descended in points onto the backs of her hands. Ending in loops, the points were secured to the bases of her middle fingers, so that she seemed to be wearing matching rings of red-violet.

Below swept many yards of shimmering satin the color of ice seen through turquoise. Over it the mauve bodice continued downward in a broad central panel. This fell to the skirt's hem, where it was purfled in silver in the Finquese style of Bakhaurus. A bandeau of scintillant cloth-of-silver circled the bodice over the bosom, sewn

there and clasped with an ornate pin of shell and pearls and silver wire. From this outer bandeau draped a sort of third skirt, long behind; in front it formed a deep, inverted V whose arms flowed down the queen's legs and thighs like folded wings of mesh-mail.

From the royal lobes cascaded prodigiously ornate eardrops like bursts of incandescent light. Elsewise her jewelry was but a single ring formed of a serpent of gold and another of silver, intertwined.

Conan swallowed. She was only a few years older than he, and the mercenary who was body-guard to her older cousin did entertain an interesting if silly dream or two . . .

Gathered with the queen were the City Governor, Acrallidus, whose beard was gray though his hair was not, and his son of about fourteen years, Krallides; and robed in dun and red, the queen's advisor Arkhaurus, a man of about forty-five. A huge carnelian seal hung on his chest from a chain of twisted silver wire. The handsome young man so near to my lady queen's right hand was Sergianus, duke's son of Tor, in Nemedra. A great sapphire-set disc of gold was suspended by a gold chain to flash on his chest.

The young noble from afar was enamored of the queen and attached to her, Conan saw almost at a glance; he noted too how Queen Ialamis looked at that same Sergianus. The queen had a suitor then, come down from a land well to the northwest. A smith's son forgot his dreams.

All gave listen while Khashtris told of the adventure in Shadizar, of the later plot, of the loyalty of Shubal and the heroism and prowess of the





Cimmerian. Eyes appraised the big youth anew. Now Conan saw respect and interest in those gazes. He was silent. In this, his first visit with such a collection of high-placed personages, he sought to look older, the brave and noble bodyguard.

He hoped that wise-eyed Acrallidus could not recognize a thief when one stood before him, however mailed and lauded!

Khashtris finished her glowing narrative, and all were silent while Queen Ialamis the Sad gazed upon the tall newcomer.

"Conan of Cimmeria: you have twice saved the life of our beloved cousin, and we are more grateful than may be expressed in words. Name a boon, warrior: what would you ask of the Queen of Khauran?"

Perhaps Conan appeared disrespectful to some; it was merely that he spoke instantly: "My soul!"

The queen blinked, stared. Some of those around her looked questioningly at each other, but still none other spoke.

"He speaks literally, Lady Queen," Khashtris told her cousin. "A certain Zamboulan sorcerer in Arenjun had the means of stealing souls from their living owners and lodging them in mirrors. Now the sorcerer is dead, but Conan and his soul remain separated. Should the mirror be broken, he will be . . . a horrid purposeless creature which he has described to me."

"Incredible," Acrallidus murmured, while the queen all but whispered, "Horrible!" And Sergianus lifted one eyebrow as if in doubt: "Sorcery? Separate soul from body? It is incredible, indeed!"

"So is the curse on the rulers of Khauran," the ruler of Khauran said in a passing quiet voice. "Conan: What is it you need us to do?"

The Cimmerian showed them the leather package he had strapped to his belt; it resembled a well-stuffed pillow, covered in leather and crisscrossed with thongs, knotted and knotted again. He squatted to place it on the pink-tiled floor, a few feet before the three steps to the queen's dais.

"The mirror is contained here, Lady Queen. It must be placed in your hands."

"Need I unwrap it?"

"No, Lady Queen," Conan said.

While all watched, he untied, broke, and slipped the thongs. Next he unwrapped four folds of what was now revealed to be a large, broad strip of well-tanned and unusually supple leather. Within, thong-bound, were two plates of metal. Soon he separated them to withdraw a package wrapped in the dark green velvet that had draped a chamber of Hisarr Zul. There was much of the stuff, and while Conan unfolded its windings with care, the eyes of everyone present stared in expectation.

At last Conan had unwrapped that which he had protected well against accidental breakage; the smallish mirror of Hisarr Zul.

"You had it wrapped well enough, Cimmerian!"

Conan looked at the speaker, the man called Sergianus of Nemedra in his sleeved, long, wine-red overtunic belted over a slightly longer tunic of green.

"Nothing in the world has been of more impor-

tance to me, Lord Sergianus, save only my life."

"Yet you risked that to rescue our cousin," Queen Ialamis said.

"Aye. And she has brought me to you, Lady Queen. Only the wearer of a royal crown can end the spell and return my soul to me. If the mirror is broken, I and my soul are parted forever. If it is broken by a crowned ruler, we are united."

The queen was leaning forward, her gaze moving from the squatting man to his mirror and back again to his face. "Then we must break it for you, Conan."

"Wait." This from Arkhaurus, the royal advisor, and Conan's eyes narrowed. "Wait, my queen. Suppose that all this is part of a sorcerous plot?—that some awful sorcery will be loosed on our lady queen by the breaking of the mirror? Dare we place faith in—"

"Lady cousin and Queen! I owe this man my life, twice over! I refuse to believe that he can be doubted, or that any plot is afoot against you. He is the unfortunate . . . and Arkhaurus wrongs both him and me."

"Queen of Khauran—" Acrallidus began, and the queen lifted a hand. The City Governor broke off, and none spoke, for they'd been silently commanded to silence. The queen studied Conan in obvious contemplation. At last, with a brief nod, she straightened.

"Bring me the mirror, Conan of Cimmeria."

Taking up the small bit of wood-framed glass in both hands, Conan carried it to the foot of the dais. Standing on the floor at the base of the three-stepped marble platform, he did not have to look up to meet the eyes of the seated queen. He held

out the mirror with both hands; with both hers she took it. Royal fingers touched his. Conan noticed that they felt no different from any other fingers, unless softer. Conan's mind accommodated that intelligence by shifting a bit, and never again would he stand—much less kneel!—in awe of royalty.

Queen Ialamis looked down into the glass of a dead sorcerer, and a wordless exclamation escaped her red-tinted lips. Then: "Why—there is a man in this glass, a tiny youth with—it is you, Conan!"

"Some think it more I than what stands here of me," he said, without himself fully understanding the twisted meaning of those words.

"Sorcery!" Arkhaurus said, in a low hiss.

"I want to see!" That from young Krallides son of Acrallidus, and he pressed forward.

The queen did not afford him that privilege. Holding the mirror with care, she stood. Conan moved aside as she descended the steps of the dais in a rustle of satin. Three paces she took along the carpet bisecting the floor of rose tiles and she stopped. Lifting the mirror with both hands, she looked at Conan.

"Lady Queen," Sergianus said urgently, "flying glass—"

Conan glanced angrily at the man just as Ialamis hurled the mirror against a wall of stone.

The Cimmerian heard the crash, and jerked as if struck; for he felt a great surge within him; a sudden wholeness, as though his body had encompassed emptiness now filled. And then he was staring at Sergianus, and Conan's eyes were large and his face showing astonishment. The



hairs stood up along his arms and on his nape. None other noted; all stared at the mirror.

Perhaps the others underwent similar reaction to Conan's; they saw the mirror shatter against the audience chamber wall, and yet they saw no flying shards of glass. All floated, eerily, just before the wall whereon the mirror had shattered—three feet above the floor.

The gleaming slivers and bits of glass seemed to dance like refulgent dust-motes of many sizes, or spilled gemstones. And then gasps sounded, for each tiniest bit of glass burst into flame. All flared brightly so that every watching eye squinted—and then flame and glass vanished.

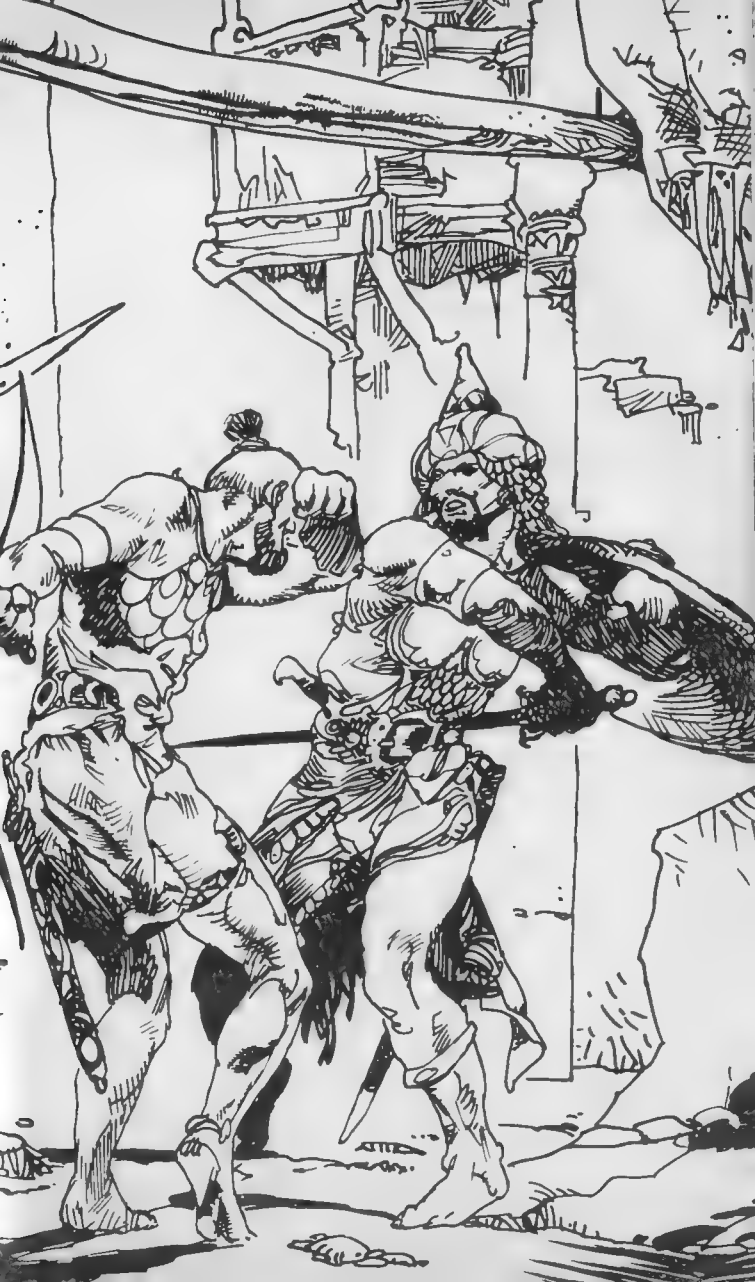
On the floor near the wall lay the wooden frame of Hisarr Zul's mirror of sorcery. Not one trace of flame could be seen; not one particle of glass. No faintest hint of the scent of fire remained in the chamber.

Now all looked at the Cimmerian. They saw how he stared at Sergianus, who, also noting, frowned. Then Conan blinked. He seemed to stagger. He gave his shaggy head a jerk. After shooting Sergianus a disbelieving look, the Cimmerian turned to the queen. When he lifted his head, Shubal and Khashtris saw Conan smile, naturally and far from bestially, for the first time since the dark-maned giant had entered their lives.

"Lady Queen, it is done. I am in debt to Khauran and its royal house. *I felt my soul return to me!*"

"I but repaid a debt, Conan," the queen said, forgetting the royal pronoun. "You are welcome in Khauran, savior of m—our cousin."







5.
**IN THE
TAVERN
OF HILIDES**

Conan and Shubal had been walking about Khauran for a couple of hours when the Shemite guided his younger companion onto a street of taverns and inns. They approached a door under a broad-striped awning of orange and bright green. The awning was particularly horrid and hurt Conan's eyes; the shop was not and did not. Small, cool and clean, it barely housed two longish trestle tables and benches, and four other tables: three-legged, for two people who wanted more intimate converse. The two bodyguards, their charge safe within the palace, sat at one of the latter tables.

"Shubal! You've not been here in awhile!"

"That's because I've been up in Shadizar with my lady," Shubal told the burly, ruddy-faced man with the large pot belly and eyes like new-tanned cowhide. His brown hair and beard looked as if someone had recently hurled a handful of sand into each.

"Ah! Oho! Shadizar, eh? Eh? And you came back," the fellow said. "Why, from all the tales I've heard of that place, your return is a miracle! Just yesterday Verenus made his delivery, and said Pertes's son went off to Shadizar—a month ago! What was it Verenus said; how do we keep good Khaurani boys on the family farm after they've seen Shadizar City of the Wicked, eh? Eh?"

"The miracle that brought me back is this little fellow with me," Shubal said, tapping Conan's shoulder. "Since Verenus was just here, Hilides, fetch us a mug each of that watery ale of his."

"Done. It was tapped this morning. What do you mean, he's a miracle? It's a miracle a lad that

age grew so big, mayhap, and suffers himself to be seen in company with such as you! Is that it? Eh?"

"Shadizar wasn't hard for me to leave," the Shemite replied. "Noble Khashtris and I were nearly killed there."

Hilides set glazed earthenware mugs before the two without so much as a thump. The fellow had the arms of a woodman or warrior, Conan thought, and the belly of a king.

"Oh! Got a story to tell, do ye? How'd it come about, Shubal? Whorehouse brawl? Irate husband? Hoho! Eh?"

"This braying mule-brain is our host, Conan: Hilides. Hilides: Conan, a Cimmerian. Noble Khashtris's new bodyguard—with me, of course."

"Cimmeria." The big taverner looked at Shubal's big companion. "Conan. Co-nan. Welcome to Khauran, Conan. Sorry about your taste in friends. A passing nice corselet you have there. You're not from Shadizar, eh?"

Conan shook his head. "The mail is," he said, and drained his mug. "Small cups you use, Hilides." Then he made a face.

Hilides laughed. "Does go down easy, don't it! Took it too fast; stings the tongue that way! And wait'll it comes back; you'll jump a mile when you fart. Verenus Cling-coin's brew. Shubal swears he waters it."

"No I don't, Hilides; I swear you water it."

"Ha! Hoho!" Hilides slapped his gut, which Conan saw was solid and firm as a thigh. "Only thing I water is my garden! I think Verenus brews it from alfalfa, Conan. Oddly though, it's popular."

"That's because it's cheap," Shubal said, "and

Verenus's daughter is coming on to be a beauty! Uh, be careful about drinking much, Conan. Noble Khashtris is . . . sensitive about that."

"I've barely dampened my throat," Conan said. "Fill it, Hilides, or a man-sized mug, if you have one. This will go on Shubal's bill until our lady parts with some coin, unless you'll make a chit for me, too."

"For a well-employed friend of Shubal, Shem's gift to womankind, I will. You look good for it; you could buy Verenus's brewing for a half-year with that mail. As a welcome to Khauran, though, I'll buy the second one."

"The second?"

"Aye—you knocked back that first mug so fast you didn't even taste it, and I'll not support such waste!"

Conan chuckled while Shubal laughed. "But only," Hilides called back, "if I hear about Shadizar and your adventure there, Shubal!"

"Huh! Try to stop me from talking about it," Shubal said, looking around. He nodded at one man, threw up his hand in greeting to another. At this hour of the afternoon, only three others gave Hilides business. "Oh—Hilly! A little Shemite sausage?"

Conan blinked. "This little place stocks sausage from down in Shem?"

"Not really," Shubal said smiling. "Hilides adds some pepper and sage and a bit of honey to the Khaurani summer sausage his wife makes, and calls it Shemite. He doesn't charge any more for it, and I think I'm the only one who knows any different. I don't say anything. It's a popular treat here. It is good, Conan. Put hair on your chest."

Conan said nothing. He had no hair there as yet, and wished he did. It was not a favored subject with him. He was sitting back, leg asprawl; now he leaned forward and thumped a pair of meaty forearms on the small round table.

"Shubal: What do you know about that Sergianus?"

"Hardly anything. No one else does, I think. It bothers me a bit now; today is only the second time ever I saw him, and this is the first time I've set eyes on that medallion he wears."

"It bothers you?"

"I think I recognize it. Or I've seen its twin."

"And—?"

"Well, where I've seen it certainly wasn't in Nemedra, Conan; never been up there. Or one just like it—as I remember."

"You think maybe he's a thief? Or buys stolen goods, maybe?"

"I haven't thought about it at all, in truth. As for buying stolen goods—most of us do, at one time or another. No, I don't think anything. I just don't remember where I've seen it—I mean, one like it."

"Did you notice anything . . . unusual about Sergianus, Shubal?"

"Certainly. He has an odd voice—and a suicidal bent."

"What? Why do you say that?"

"Conan, he is paying court to our queen. I do believe, judging from the looks they exchange and his concern for her, that they two may love each other."

"One larger mug of Verenus's beer," Hilides said, "on me. And a bit of the fiery sausage of Shem." He stood at Conan's elbow.



"Thanks, Hilides," Conan said, hardly glancing at the man. "Shubal . . . why is that suicidal?"

Hilides, half-turning away, paused. "Suicidal?"

"Conan," Shubal said, "the unhappy Queens of our Khauran have more to contend with than the Curse of the Witches. They also have a hard time keeping consorts. Our Queen Ialamis was wed at fourteen, delivered of twins at fifteen—"

"—and one of them the Witch," Hilides said, lingering.

"—and widowed when she was only seventeen. A fever carried off her husband, and almost killed her. She lay abed for months."

"Months," Hilides said, standing over the little three-legged table and imperturbably injecting himself into the conversation. "Months, and was wan and slow to move for a full year. Some think she's never recovered; it's been four years now. Lord Arkhaurus feels that the problem is as much in her mind as in her . . . body." The taverner hesitated over the final word, and lowered his voice, as though it might be worse than untoward to use such a word in speaking of the queen. "This young dukeson from Nemedias doesn't worry about that though, does he?"

"That's just what we were talking about," Shubal said, around a mouthful of deceptively pale sausage, dotted with red. "Conan and I are just come from the audience chamber, and Conan asked—"

"The audience chamber! And then here? My benevolent stars—Hilides is honored today!"

"Oh stop, Hilly. Anyhow, Conan asked if I noted aught unusual about Noble Sergianus. I

told him aye, the man's plainly suicidal."

"Oh." Hilides grinned and wagged his head. "For hanging about our queen? Mayhap he is, eh? Are they thick? So I hear. In the mean while, though, I also hear that she's happier than she has been in years. Or so they say, eh? I don't spend my time loitering about the audience chamber, rubbing elbows with our sovran and her charming visitor from Nemedi." He glanced around. "Merkes—our Shubal's just come from an audience with Herself!"

From across the room a man said, "Ishtar? Don't be silly. She doesn't speak to Shemites!"

"I meant the queen . . ."

Shubal half-turned to call to the man named Merkes. "Or anyone as ugly as you, Merkes! For your information, though, Ishtar is a Khaurani import: Herself is a Shemite goddess."

"I meant the queen," Hilides said again, trying to regain control of a conversation that wasn't his to begin with.

"Bosh and cowfeathers!" Merkes said from within a vast black beard. "She was born right here in Khauran, right where Her temple stands now, across from the palace."

"You damned chauvinists," another man said; the one Shubal had waved to. He sat in the far corner, rear. "Ishtar's from my own Nemedi!"

Shubal shook his head, laughing. "The ignorance of the clientele this place attracts! Everyone knows that Bel was born in Shumer, of Shem—"

"Who's talking about Bel?" Hilides asked.

"—precisely four thousand nine years ago, which is the day before the world began."

"Bel was born in Shem before there was any Shem?" Hilides said.



"Ishtar," Shubal went on, never having glanced at the tavern's owner, "is claimed by the Pelishtians—also of Shem—who say the city of Asgalun was begun on the site of her appearance, full-formed, from a stone of the earth that was split by a single bolt of green lightning. Even her priests agree that this was two hundred years after Bel's birth, for Shem was lonely for a woman's touch. Stars above, can you imagine what a people would be like, with only a single god, and him male? Oho!"

"Did you know that Bel's the Turanian god of thieves?" Conan tried.

"That's what's wrong with Stygia," Merkes said, dropping the subject of Ishtar's place of origin. "All those midnighters have is that noxious Set!"

"Ah," Hilides grinned, speaking quickly and raising a big hand for attention, "But you are forgetting Derketo! That thrice-sensuous creature is most definitely female, and Stygian! No, for people with only a male deity, you have to go to those desert tribesmen, the Habiru."

"Up in Nemedias we call her Serketo the Stygian Serpent-Slut!"

Conan sat silent, trying not to guzzle the new-made beer while the others talked about nothing. Gods! Who cared! Where he came from, gods were plentiful and chief among them was Crom. Nor did that god, never called father, care what happened with an infant, once it was birthed. What self-respecting deity would concern himself—aye, or herself—with the affairs of humankind? It was for humans to concern themselves with the affairs and preferences of the gods, whom they

blamed for half that which went bad and most of the good that befell. Derketo did sound promising! Meanwhile, the Cimmerian wanted to find out more about Sergianus, and his own eerie vision in the queen's chamber.

"... spider-god over in those old ruins called Yezud," Merkes was saying.

"Shubal," Conan said low and fast, "what's the name of that fellow from Nemedias?"

"Sergianus."

"No, dolt, the one over there who says Ishtar is Nemedian."

"Ha!" Hilides essayed again; "You can tell these two are friends—Conan just called Shubal a dolt!"

"Anyone that big," Merkes said, "can call me double-dolt, if he wants!"

"Oh," Shubal said, "he's Nebinio."

"How long has he been away from Nemedias?"

"I don't know," Shubal said.

"Say, these two are ignoring us eh? Eh?"

"Neb!" Shubal called. "How long since you were in Nemedias?"

"Too long, by Mitra! What's that have to do with anything?"

Conan twisted his neck to look back at the chestnut-haired fellow in the corner. Nebinio wore a tunic that had probably begun—years and years ago, when last he'd had his hair trimmed—as white, and a faded half-cloak or cape that was either filthy or unwisely dyed the color of dust.

"Wondered what you thought of this countryman of yours at the palace," Conan said. "Son of the Duke of Tor."

"Where're you from, big fellow?" Nebinio said,

a bit surly.

"Cimmeria. My name is Conan."

"Well, I make it a rule never to argue with a man wearing sword and mail," Nebinio, who was perhaps five and half feet tall, said, "and I don't know this man whereof you speak—Sergianus, isn't it? But Tor's no duchy."

Conan turned himself a bit more around. "Sergianus is duke's son of Tor, in Nemedias."

"Well," Nebinio said, "Mayhap he's just making himself more important. Tor's a barony. Presided over by a baron. Baron Amalric is about . . . oh, fifty, perhaps. Has a son who will succeed him, also named Amalric."

"No other sons?"

"Of course he has other sons! Who knows anything about second and third sons, though, noble or no? Hilides, unless you're going to spend the rest of your life there by their table, I'd like more wine here, and a slice of the black."

Hilides departed the table of Conan and the Shemite. The other drinker, the quiet one near the door, plunked down a coin and left. Shubal said:

"Why are you so curious about a Nemedian, your first day in Khauran?"

Conan looked at him very seriously. "Are you not curious about him? He may well be your next king."

"No no—queen's consort. But I see what you mean."

"A baron's severalth son, elevating himself to ducal rank, and who you think is wearing a medallion you've seen somewhere other than in Nemedias. Mayhap he's one of those accursed Zingaran adventurers—or a Stygian sorcerer, old as

the hills themselves, in disguise."

"You believe in sorcery?" Shubal shrugged. "I'm probably wrong about the amulet he wears. You about through, here? We'd best be getting back. We should be at the palace right now, waiting, and we'd better be about when Noble Khashtris is ready to return home."

"I need another jug of ale just to cool my mouth after a bit of that damned sausage of yours! My tongue is numb and my throat feels like one of those flame-eaters in the bazaar in Arenjun!"

Shubal laughed. "I'll just finish it for you, then," he said, scooping up the remainder of Conan's sausage. "We can't all have strong stomachs."

"Strong! Yours must be lined with brass!"

"Come, Conan; we can always try to beg a cup at the palace."

"Hmp."

They rose to depart, despite Hilides's expostulations; he'd not had the story of what he called Shubal's "adventure" in Shadizar. Tomorrow, Shubal told him. The two companions left the little tavern.

Four blocks later they short-cut through a marketplace crowded with awning-shaded trestleboards and bins and baskets, loud with hawkers of various fresh edibles. Conan inhaled air redolent with the aromas of a dozen vegetables and fruits, and as many condiments. Shubal shouldered Conan, making a sudden change in their direction. The man from Shem ambled to a fruit-spread table beneath a plain scarlet awning. In its shade sat a moon-faced old woman with much fat and few teeth. Standing beside her was a young wom-



an, plumply attractive, uncommonly chesty in her loose blue outer shift and apron.

"Sfalana!" Shubal called brightly. "Miss me?"

The young woman gave him a cool look from under thick, arched brows. "Oh, have you been gone?"

"Evil wench! You know I have, and that you've missed me."

"I've managed to keep myself occupied," Sfalana said, giving Conan a dark-eyed appraisal. The old woman shook with her ridiculously high voiced laugh. The sound reminded Conan of that of a jackal on the great Turanian desert.

"Counting melons, doubtless," Shubal said, unfazed. "How about a hug?"

"I'm busy, Shubal."

"He just wants to squeeze your melons!" the old woman shrilled, and made her jackal laughing sound anew. "Why not buy two of these instead, Shubal? They won't keep you warm, but they're all the way from Korveka, I swear."

"Oh, of course," Shubal scoffed. "I can just see you importing melons from . . . Korveka . . . that's it!"

They looked at him, the old woman and the young, and at the tall youth standing silent beside him.

"Korveka!" Shubal repeated.

"I swear," the old woman said, and laughed.

"Believe her and you'll believe Derketo is a virgin," Sfalana said. "Where have you been, anyhow?"

Shubal reached across the piled fruits and seized her hands. "Shadizar, with Noble Khashtris. Just a shopping trip for her—things for

her and the queen. But for me—it was nearly death. We were attacked, and—”

“Oh, Shubal!”

Oh, Conan thought. Now he understood why Sfalana had been so cool and distant with Shubal; she loved him and he had gone off without telling her. Her eyes and tightened hands showed her concern.

“Aye. Four bandits slew one bearer, and the other fled. The other two guards were part of it, Sfalana! One played sick so that there were only two of us that night, and the other one ran off the instant the attack began. He was part of it too, we later learned. This—oh. Sfalana, this is Conan. He’s from Cimmeria. He saved my life, and our lady’s.”

Sfalana turned huge dark eyes on Conan. “Ishtar smile on you, Conan of Cimmeria.” And instantly she returned all attention to Shubal. “Were you hurt?”

“Not a scratch, I swear. Tell you about it tonight?”

She nodded. “Come for dinner?” She glanced at Conan, as if she thought perhaps she should ask him too, but didn’t really want to.

“Uh . . . no, I’d better show Conan a few things, first. He’s joined Noble Khashtris’s service too, and hasn’t even seen his bed; we’re just back. And we’d better be on our way. Noble Khastris expects us, at the palace.”

“The palace!” the old woman cried, and laughed.

“Of Korveka,” Conan told her, and winked. He was tired of being a less than comfortable bystander.

She laughed again, then: "What know you of Korveka, big lad? You from Koth?"

"No, Cimmeria. North—"

"Ah! Cimmeria! I've heard of it. Cold! I've never met anyone from Cimmeria before. My name is Mishellisa, Conan of Cimmeria. Come along with Shubal tonight and I'll show you a good time!" And she jackal-laughed, to assure him that she only jested. Conan thought it best to continue his sentence without taking note of hers.

"—of here. I'd never heard of Korveka until you mentioned it. I just said it because you said these were Korveka melons."

"You hear that, Shubal, you doubting Shemite! Your big friend believes me!"

"You believe her, Conan," Shubal said, "and you'll believe Derketo of Stygia's a virgin!" While the old woman cackled, Shubal looked at Sfalana. "Later." He glanced at Mishellisa. "Go to bed early, grandmother."

Her high-voiced, ululating laughter followed the two young man as they moved away. Shubal glanced at the sky.

"We'd best stride out," he said.

Conan did. "What's Korveka?" he asked.

"A barony of Koth, right up against our western border," Shubal said. "By rights it ought to be part of Khauran. Khauran was once part of Koth, you know. Back in their Empire days."

"Umm. You seemed excited to hear about it."

"Your pardon, lady. Oh, aye! Seeing Sfalana and thinking about tonight I almost forgot again. Aye, Korveka! That's where I've seen that medallion—I mean, one just like Sergianus's—before. Around the neck of the Baron of Korveka,

of Koth! I passed through his domain several years ago, on my way here."

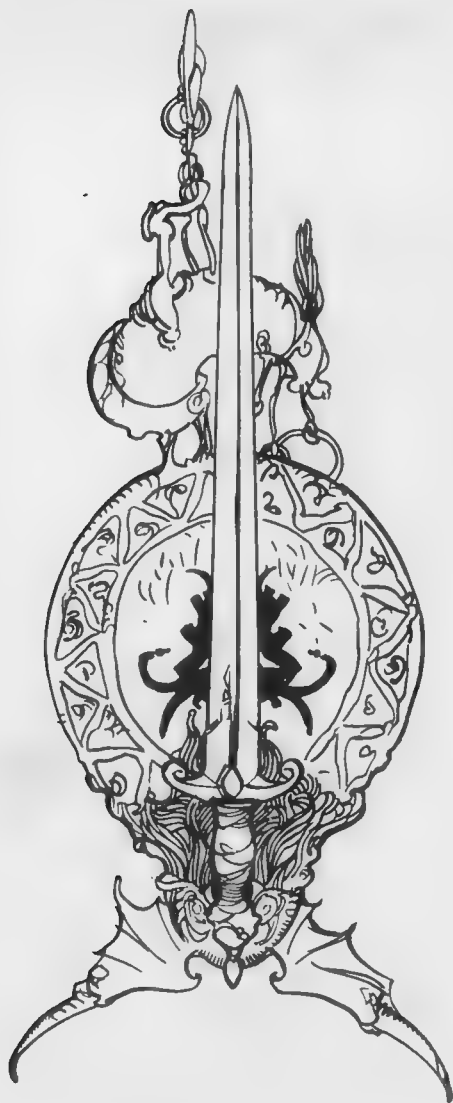
"Look out where you're going, lout!"

That to Conan from a bustling man in a violently chartreuse robe that was loose everywhere save over his paunch. Conan stared; the many-chinned fellow betook himself off with alacrity, muttering the while.

"What does my lord of Korveka look like, Shubal?"

Shubal barked a short laugh. "Not like that handsome Sergianus! His son, perhaps. It has been five years—old Sabanitus—no, Sabaninus, Sabaninus. . . he's probably dead by now. A very old man. A very old man, Conan. Sergianus barely looks old enough to be his son."

Conan thought on that, and on his vision in the queen's audience chamber, while they strode through Khauran's capital to its royal palace.





6.

SORCERY!

Once Conan had been introduced to the four members of the house of Noble Khashtris, Shubal led him to the room they would share. It was larger than many the Cimmerian had slept in, and larger than the huts of many, many peasant families. The fat dumpling of a blond maid iterated and reiterated her assurance that his pallet was clean and fresh.

Conan removed his vest of mail and the padded jack beneath. The fat dumpling of a maid's fatter sow of a mother, also blond, measured him. The mistress had instructed her to make two tunics for the new member of the household. Evriga muttered while she measured. When her daughter wondered aloud if the big youth was big everywhere, Evriga ordered her out of the chamber. Daughter left; mother rounded on the Cimmerian.

"You are not to lay so much as one of these huge hands on that girl, do you hear?"

Conan had not considered it, and might have done so only were he and the girl marooned on a small and unpeopled island far out to sea, with certain knowledge of remaining there, alone, beyond six months. Nevertheless he replied without rancor, without smiling. (Beyond Evriga, Shubal was making ridiculous faces at his fellow bodyguard.)

"I hear and obey," Conan said quietly.

"Hmp. Glibly spoke," Evriga said.

"Would you like me to swear?"

Evriga reiterated her "Hmp" and resumed her taking of measurements.

Standing very still, towering over Evriga, Conan swore not to touch her daughter: "This I vow by Crom, grim Lord of the Mound, and by

Badb, and Lir and Macha, and Manannan and Morrigan as well, and Nemain, Venomous Nemain."

"I never heard of any of them," Evriga said. "Ishtar—what arms!"

"I swear too by Ishtar, who as all know is of Nemedias, and by Set and I swear too by Derketo—"

"Never mind that Stygian slut-god, barbarian!"

"And by Yog," Conan solemnly intoned, "King of Demons."

"All right," the woman aid, "all right." And measurements completed, she left them.

Immediately Conan and Shubal fell to laughing. Shubal interrupted to assure Conan that it was Evriga who truly had designs on him, and erupted anew. Conan did not reply; Evriga might have made a fair mother, he thought, or an excellent mattress.

"Two tunics! I have never owned three tunics at once in my entire life, Shubal!"

"All that long!" the Shemite grinned. "How old are you, Conan?"

"Twenty."

"Um. In a way, I'd have thought you older. In another, you seem younger. I too am twenty, my fellow guardian of the body of Khashtris."

Conan, who was seventeen, nodded and they went to take the evening meal. Spartus, Khashtris's head of household, presented the newcomer with a single silver coin.

"Three of these would purchase the sword you wear; eight would buy a good mare, Conan. This is against your wages, that you might not be penniless in Khauran."

"What," Conan asked of Shubal, "is the price of a mug of ale at Hilides?"

"Two for a copper. That silver coin will exchange for twenty good coppers."

"I am almost rich enough to be drunk," Conan said, and made the silver Queenhead vanish.

Shubal rose laughing, said he had business, and departed. Conan, who knew the nature of that "business," knew longing. He also felt that he was new, and on duty, whether in Khauran there was danger to Khashtris or no. Finishing his dinner, he went out to examine the gardens behind the house. He sought to pass the time of evening with the gardener. Amid the cool verdure, beneath gently rustling trees, that man had no care for a stranger's need of companionship. He affected rude manners and talked but little.

It was not pleasant to be new in a city, and to know that one's only friend was with a woman, and to have no companionship whatever. Conan returned to his and Shubal's room.

Shubal was very absent. There Conan abode, sitting and sprawling and restlessly pacing by turns. He gave much thought to the day's occurrences and to what he had learned—and regained—and to what he had seemed to see at the instant of his soul's adjoining his body. These reflections troubled his mind. He was doubly troubled: he was intensely aware of what Shubal was doing, this night, with Sfalana of the melons.

He was vehemently aware of Khashtris's presence in this large nightbound house. *Her* house. The house of Noble Khashtris, in which she was employer and cousin to the queen, not a frightened and grateful girl-woman under a col-

lapsed tent.

Eventually his mind and body were so troubled and restless that he had to escape the room. It seemed to have shrunk and at the same time become too large for one person alone. Its four walls leered at him.

He left it. The house was dark and silent. Silent as a panther the Cimmerian paced along rug-strewn halls of colored stone floored with marble. He let himself out by the rear door. Trees rustled and the grass and shrubbery filled his nostrils with a fragrance that was green and fresh and cool. Soon, pacing in shadow-haunted moonlight, he had memorized the shrubbery, trees, and garden-plot. He'd have been delighted if an assassin or two had come slipping over one of the walls. None came. The branches of the trees seemed to whisper of love.

After circuiting the house, Conan ascended to the porch and sat for a time amid square-based columns painted the blue of the sky and decorated with plumey strutting birds in green and yellow and blues.

That, too, palled. He rose. His attempt to enter was blocked by a locked door. *Good*, he thought, for he was employed as bodyguard to a noble who trusted him, and he went around back.

That door, too, had been barred from within. *Good . . . but . . .*

Well, Conan mused, no one knows I came outside, and the moon is high. The night ages. A very efficient steward, that damned Spartus!

Conan spent the night in the garden.

Just after dawn he was on the porch, his stomach rumbling while he awaited the awaken-

ing of the household of noble Khashtris. Eventually the door was opened to the day. Conan explained, and Evriga laughed at him as he entered. That was enough; while he breakfasted, alone, he was advised by cook that his tunic stank. That was more than enough.

"So," the seated Conan said quietly without looking up from his wooden bowl, "does your breath. Now hush and give me more of that only fair gruel else I consider telling our employer how you imbibe wine intended for cooking, even of a morning."

He received another bowl, in silence, and was left in peace.

Shubal entered the little room as Conan was finishing. They exchanged smiles, and the Shemite winked, but neither man said anything. *I had rather be in someone's army than have this job*, Conan mused as he left the other man to his morning gruel.

Conan had nothing to do that morning, and did not enjoy not doing it. Just after noon—at last!—he and Shubal unnecessarily escorted their employer to the meeting house of the Advisory Council. It was there, while Khashtris was within, that Arkhaurus came walking out among the lofty columns covered with swirling multicolor patterns. He approached the Cimmerian.

"You stared hard at my lord Sergianus on yesterday, Conan," the Advisor to the Throne said. "All the while that our lady queen was performing the act to rescue you from black sorcery. Why stared you so?"

"I—might I answer question with question, Arkhaurus? How came that noble lord here?"

"Ah—you think you knew him afore, then?" Arkhaurus's eyes were so dark as to be night black, and they seemed to pierce like sharpened bits of onyx. Today he wore a longish white tunic over dun-hued leggings, and the silver chain supporting the carnelian seal on his chest. When Conan said nothing, the rangy man spoke on.

"As you are bodyguard to the queen's cousin and something of a hero for having brought her safely home from that wicked Shadizar, I will tell you. The men at the western gate saw him first. They beheld a frightsome apparition: a man in fine clothing that was torn and stained, and him all bloodied and afoot. He identified himself. He was believed because of his manner and the medallion he wore. It is obviously no trifle, or new either. The sentries brought him to Acrallidus whilst we two were conferring. We soon saw to his bathing, and provided him with a robe. Over wine, he advised that he had been assaulted by robbers who had slain his two retainers and fled when they heard a dog barking. Thinking others were coming, the bandits fled with the mounts of the dukeson, Sergianus and his retainers, and his sumpter animals as well."

"He was injured?"

Arkhaurus shook his head. "He bore no wounds aside from a smallish cut on his sword-hand."

"He fought, then. The blood on him came from his own sword, which must have wounded one of his attackers."

"I see that you do know combat, and do think as well. Good for you, my boy. Begging his indulgence and patience, we sent men to look. He was lordly austere about our wish to corroborate

his story, but nice enough. He is in truth a pleasant fellow. Our men returned to report that they had found the corpses, and blood, and the marks of many stamping hooves. Tracks led west, to Koth."

"To Koth."

"Aye. The fleeing bandits."

Fleeing horses, anyhow, Conan mused, and nodded in silent invitation for the man of five-and-forty or so to continue.

"One sword, bloodied, lay at the scene; otherwise the bandits had taken weapons and horses."

"Without killing Sergianus."

Arkhaurus pursed his lips, giving Conan an admonitory look. "The lord Sergianus," he said, with a bit of stress on the title, "said that once his men were downed and he unhorsed, he lay as if dead. For surely one man afoot cannot fight three. They were coming toward him to be certain of his death when they heard the dog. One opined aloud that such a sound doubtless meant people, and they hadn't after all come bent on murder, but on booty. The three galloped off."

"Did the lord Sergianus say that one was wounded?"

"Two, indeed, he said bore wounds. Once they had gone, the duke's son arose and made his way here, afoot. We accompanied him then to the queen. He told her his story in our presence; all was the same. Our good Queen Ialamis kindly offered him clothing and lodgings as the son of a foreign noble, far from home and so foully robbed in our land. That was just under two months ago; he has remained."

"Paying court to Queen Ialamis."

"He is very good for her; everyone sees that. Our queen has long been a most lonely and unhappy woman, Conan. At her next birthday she will be one-and-twenty. Yet she has endured the burden of the crown and her misfortunes these seven years, and borne but once, though they were twins—you know of this?"

"Aye."

"And of the curse on the royal House of Ashkaurus?"

"Aye."

"And that it was our poor Ialamis who bore the witch in this century, and made the bravely logical, and yet terrible and soul-tearing decision—all alone—concerning that doom-bearing child of her own womb."

"I know it, aye. And that she was widowed within a couple of years."

"Aye. Well then, you can perceive that it is no happy queen I have advised since then—and indeed, been as father to. She looks older than her years, Conan, and looked older still, before the arrival of the Nemedian lord. She had much trouble sleeping, and suffered horribly from nightmares in which she heard her dead babe crying out to her from the desert. The child was Salome, a witch, and she represented horror and evil. Nevertheless, my lady Queen had carried the babe within her, and it was her own child she ordered slain."

Conan nodded. Once he fathered a child, he could not imagine himself slaying it, no matter the reason or logic; not in infancy, at any rate.

"Yes," he said. "I understand, and thank Arkhaurus the Royal Advisor for taking so much of

his time to tell me of Khauran. And then the son of the Nemedian duke came." *Except that there is no duke over Tor in Nemedia.*

"The young Duke of Tor, aye. I have seen years fall from our queen as dead leaves from a strong tree, leaving it to bloom and thrive anew in spring. I have seen life return to her haunted eyes, Conan, and now she is cheerful, at times almost girlish again. My lord Sergianus, Conan, is the best thing to happen to Queen Ialamis—and thus to Khauran—in many years. As you are, to her noble cousin, for you saved her life. My queen and Dukeson Sergianus are smitten each with the other, methinks, though they are not lovers."

"Not yet, anyhow."

That came from Shubal, who had joined them without Arkhaurus's noticing. Conan had noted the Shemite's approach, but had seen no reason to interrupt the queen's adviser. Now Arkhaurus turned those awl-sharp eyes on Shubal.

"The prospect of a landless Nemedian, then," Conan hastily said, "as Khauran's lord does not disturb you." He did not quite make it a question.

"No," Arkhaurus said.

Shubal said, "Better, for the matter of that, a landless adventurer than one who may be kin of the king of a country that has so long eyed this little nation."

"Shubal," Arkhaurus said, "refers of course to Koth. Surely we cannot call Dukeson Sergianus an 'adventurer', though."

"Oh no, no," Shubal said, "I meant that even if he were, that would be preferable to a Kothian. Koth would gladly trade off her western provinces for dominion over these rich farmlands of

Khauran!"

"Umm," Arkhaurus said noncommittally. "But Conan . . . you have not answered my original question: why stared you so at my lord Sergianus? Have you seen him aforenow?"

"No, I—what I saw was . . ." And an idea was in Conan's head like a new flashing gem, or as if the plan had been writ on an arrow shot into his head. "Arkhaurus . . . do you read Turanian?"

The statesman looked puzzled, but nodded. "Aye," he said, and went on in the Turanian tongue, "Aye, I speak it, read it, and can write it, Conan. Why?"

"Because," Conan said, "it is the only language I write—and that not excellently. Shubal . . . you have letters?"

Shubal did not look his most comfortable. "I am, uh, fair in Shemite—"

"Which I cannot read," Arkhaurus said.

"Nor I," Conan said.

"Well, actually," Shubal went on, "I write pretty well in Shemite, but only fair in Kothic."

Conan knew that Kothic was the tongue of Khauran, with a few modifications; the written language remained even closer to the original.

"Then I want to conduct an experiment. Shubal . . . without saying his name, will you write a description of that man we spoke of yesterday, who had the medallion?"

"Sergianus?"

"No, the other—and without his name, Shubal."

"Oh. He's probably dead by now, Conan. It's been over four years. Nearly five."

"Indulge me."

Shubal would; they went into the whitewashed building. The aged scribe just beyond the portico was none too happy to turn two strips of freshly scraped vellum over to a pair of ruffian mercenaries. As they were Noble Khashtiris's men and the request came from the Advisor to the Throne, he could hardly refuse. Soon Conan and Shubal, each with his back to the other, were painstakingly writing out descriptions. A mystified Arkhaurus waited with his patience on a short rein. His appearance was that of one just short of anger.

Pausing now and then to scan their memories for details or perhaps words, Shemite and Cimmerian dipped their quills frequently and scratched away. Each cursed more than once in a language different from that which he wrote.

Conan finished first, and Shubal but moments after. Arkhaurus looked his inquiry at the Cimmerian, who bade Shubal read what he had written.

"Better I than Arkhaurus, with my spelling! 'He is very old,' " Shubal read, haltingly as a boy even over his own just-inscribed words. " 'Most of his head is bald. His hair is white unto yellow and hangs down lank like a fringe. His skull has spots on it, sort of orangey-tan. So do his hands and he squints and I think he does not see well. His left eye droops. So does his mouth and it has deep lines around it. Teeth are yellowed and two are missing on the right . . . ' "

"Above or below?" Conan interrupted.

"Below. 'His mustache is white, and fuller on the left'—no, it's the right—'than on the left. He is terribly thin. His hair is yellowish with age and there is none on his hands at all and the veins are very large on the backs of them. They quiver.' "

The Shemite looked up. He shrugged, finished. Conan seemed to have paled. "And that describes . . ."

"Sabaninus, lord Baron of Korveka, in Koth."

"Look here, Conan, what is the purpose of this . . . boy's exercise?"

"Arkhaurus, there is sorcery here. A man said on yester day that Tor is a barony in Nemedra, not a duchy. Does Sergianus elevate his rank, or does he not know? And Shubal recognizes his medallion—my lord Sergianus's; he saw it or its twin five years ago on the baron of Kothic Korveka."

Arkhaurus heaved a sigh and gestured with both hands, palms up. "What matter these niggling points?"

"This," Conan said. "Sergianus spoke just as the queen started to break the mirror of sorcery for me. At the instant my soul returned, I was looking at him. And . . . he changed. I saw another man there where he stood, in the same clothes and medallion. I have never been so far southwest even as Khauran City afore, and never seen Korveka's lord. But here is what I saw standing beside your queen on yester day, Queen's Advisor."

And Conan read aloud from his own vellum:

"A tall, lean, very old man with a bald crown dotted with age-spots and yellowish-white hair hanging down like a ragged curtain all around his head. His mustache, also aged white and now yellowing, has a gap on the right side; and his left eye, his mustache, and his mouth all droop. Lines mark his face like gulleys, especially around the mouth, which is missing two lower teeth on the right. His hands quiver and great standing veins

on their backs look like worms under the skin, which is hairless and shining. They are also marked with the same brownish-orange spots that dot his skull above the hairline. Finally, he has a small brown wart in the fold of his cheek beside his left nostril."

"So has Baron Sabaninus!" Shubal practically shouted. "That . . . what you wrote sounds just like him!" He nervously scratched his chest. "But how—"

"Sorcery," Conan said.

"Impossible," the Queen's Advisor said. "Coincidence. That might describe many men of great age. What could the meaning be of such a situation? What can it matter?"

"It could matter to Khauran! Suppose that it means just this," Conan said: "that somehow a Kothic noble has been given the appearance of youth, and sent here—most likely by the king you say covets Khauran—to charm and wed your lonely queen."

"To deliver Khauran to Koth!" Shubal burst out.

"Sorcery," Conan said. "And I, a victim of sorcery until yesterday, was enabled to see through this spell at the instant of my deliverance from my own."

The three men were staring at each other when Khashtris came rustling out among the parti-colored columns, ready to return home.

As dusk shadowed the palace with rose and a deepening mauve within its chambers, Ialamis sat very close to Sergianus. He was discoursing on a proposal or Acrallidus. The young lord stared



straight ahead; her eyes held their gaze as if fastened on his face, on his lips. Her lids dreamily shaded those dark eyes, but did not conceal their luminosity, their sparkle of love. Some slaves gazed so, at their masters.

Her knee moved every so slightly to rest against his, and he glanced at her. He spoke as if in accusation; certainly not as if to a queen: "Ialamis! Are you hearing my words?"

"Yes," she said softly. "If you believe it is a bad idea, I will tell Acrallidus, and that will be an end to that."

"You sound as if you're in a dream, a trance."

"I am."

"Can't you pay more attention to the concerns of your own realm?"

"Not while I am alone with you."

"Can't you stop staring at me that way, woman?"

"No, Sergianus," she said softly. "Should I?"

He gave her thigh a careless pat, a fleeting touch. "I must go."

"Why?" she asked softly. She swayed closer and her lips remained parted.

He touched, only touched her soft lips with his. His hands, clamping on her upper arms, held her back, as if at bay. "Because I must," Sergianus said, and rose and left the Queen of Khauran.

She stared dreamily after him, and she sighed.

The moment he was out of the room, Sergianus's face relaxed into a triumphant smile. *I have her!* he thought; *and with this pose of coolness, I'll soon hear her begging!* And he grinned, and went to his own palace chamber.

There awaited Arkhaurus, Advisor to the Queen of Khauran.





7.

ROSELA... AND ASSASSINS

On the following evening Khashtris went to the palace to play at cards with the queen and others; she would remain overnight or be escorted home by royal guards. Conan and Shubal were at their ease for the night. They walked down to the tavern of Hilides.

Over the evening's first mug of ale, Conan was still stubbornly insisting that they had been followed when the girl appeared in the tavern's doorway. She looked about fifteen. A childish mass of walnut-hued curls capped her head above a tiny-chinned heartshaped face with eyes like matched spheres of jasper. The flippy little yellow tunic that hardly covered her elfin body was torn so that one small shoulder was exposed. Conan saw that the wide-eyed girl was panting as if she had been running. Her gaze swiftly roved the interior of its patrons and abruptly she ran to Conan. Before he could so much as exclaim, she was on his knee with her arms around him.

"Please pretend I'm your girl and if a man follows me, look mean at him!"

Conan was more than willing to wrap an arm around her. It half covered her back all the way across, with room for his hand to hold her waist; indeed his fingers lay on her narrow little belly.

A man did step into the doorway. He too panted as though he had been running; chasing. His eyes sought within the tavern; Conan glowered. The man clenched his teeth while he stared at the huge arm shielding the girl's back—and at the icy blue eyes that were like dagger blades, leveled at him over her shoulder. Grinding his teeth, the young fellow departed into the night.

Her name was Rosela and she was lovely and a



short time later Shubal departed for he had become as the third horse to a double-hitch; the Cimmerian obviously had in Rosela all the company he needed. Last night Conan had been very alone. Tonight he felt no sympathy for Shubal. He did not even watch the Shemite's back as he left the tavern.

Seconds afterward, a cry arose outside. It had not faded before there followed the clangor of sharp blades. The diminutive Rosela slid off his knee as Conan rose with a curse.

His sword was in his hand before he reached the doorway.

A man lay dead or dying on the dim-lit street just outside; two others, masked, assaulted a fourth. He was Shubal, and he called Conan's name. That prompted one of his attackers to glance around.

The man turned in time to catch Conan's heavy side-armed stroke across the throat rather than the side of his neck. His severed jugular erupted and he staggered back five or six paces, looking astonished, before he fell.

Conan's and Shubal's swords struck the masked and cloaked second attacker at the same time, neck and belly.

Three men were down in their blood, and Conan had not so much as parried a stroke. He saw that blood came thickly from a nasty sword-bite in Shubal's left forearm. Thrusting the second wight through the middle. Shubal left his sword sheathed there, standing, while he clamped his hand above the cut on his other arm.

"Had to defend myself with something," he said apologetically. "It was get this arm hacked or

lose half my face."

"Just don't faint. Sit down." Conan looked around to see a wide-eyed Rosela in the doorway. Other faces peered from behind her, all male. "Push back through those goggle-eyed geese behind you," Conan said in a feral snarl, "and get a cup of wine out here. Out of her way, you behind her. Back!"

He turned back to find that Shubal was not sitting, but asquat beside the first fallen man. "It's poor sour old Nebinio," the Shemite said. "They killed him just as I came out."

The Nemedian, Conan thought, and looked up at a dancing light and the sound of men tramping and clanking. Four came, matching of arms and armor.

"Here! What goes on here? You two are both foreigners, aren't you?"

Seeing that they were men of the Khauran City Watch, Conan said, "Why yes," and, feeling mean: "Don't you like foreigners, then?" He squinted at the young man under the high-held lanthorn. A strutter, Conan thought. So damned self-important in his uniform he's like a game cock.

"Not when I see what appear to be three corpses! Consider yourself under arrest."

"Consider yourself in trouble if you make any other such noises, sub-prefect. I am Shubal and this is Conan, and we are bodyguards to the Noble Lady Khashtris who even foreigners know is cousin to our Queen Ialamis. Close your mouth and open your eyes and you will see that two of these men are masked. Is that a clue, sub-prefect, as to whom you might want to be detaining?"





Conan held his smile. He had not seen Shubal handle himself so, before. He was impressed and pleased. The four men of the watch were standing silent; three stared at the sub-prefect, who appeared to be encountering considerable difficulty in getting his mouth closed.

At last he said, "Shubal, you said?"

"I did. And Conan. I didn't quite hear your name."

The man availed himself then of the opportunity to squat beside the man in the cloak; that way the name he muttered was not clear. Conan's glance met Shubal's. Shubal still clutched his wounded arm, the bloodflow from which had slackened. The two smiled.

"Masked, aye," the squatting Watch squad's commander said. "Dead, too. This your, uh, sword, uh, Shubal?"

"This one's dead, too, Prefect. Died of blood-loss, I'd say. He's drained. Throat's slashed out."

"Yes, it's my sword," Shubal said.

The sub-prefect straightened. "Thieves?"

"Assassins," Shubal said through close-held teeth. "They murdered this man. He isn't even armed."

"You know any of them?"

"This is Nebinio, a Nemedian who's lived here for years and years, a worker in leather. Those two are still masked—here, Conan, what're you doing?"

"Be still," Conan said. "Pouring this wine Rosela fetched on your wound. Rosela: you leave me now and I'll find you and slit your throat! Hurt, Shubal? Good. Now we borrow part of the cloak of this killer and tie that arm up."

"Here," Rosela said, "take a strip of my tunic. That cloak's filthy."

"Crom's beard, girl, you almost aren't wearing it already! Be still, Shubal. Let the wine soak in. Good for wounds, wine is."

"Frightful . . . waste," Shubal gasped.

Rosela remained; her tunic remained intact to be removed later by the Cimmerian; a strip of city Watch-man's sash, no less, bound up Shubal's arm; neither he nor anyone in the tavern recognized the unmasked bandits. The second to fall might have lived to be questioned, for all his bearing two wounds, had not Shubal sheathed his sword in the fellow's intestines to avoid dropping it or returning it unwiped to its proper sheath. The sub-prefect handed Hilides a shiny Queenhead to cover "whatever these two men have had this night" and gave Cimmerian and Shemite a hopeful look. The silver coin erased both their tabs altogether, but no one was of a mind to tell the sub-prefect so. When a man had made a mistake and wanted to expiate: let him! Conan and Shubal were asked, not told, to stop at the magistrate's any time on the morrow, to leave a statement. Murder had obviously been done, and justice in the form of self-defense. Still, this was not lawless Shadizar or the Mall of Arenjun, and the magistrate had his records to keep and reports to file with City Governor Acrallidus.

"Shubal," Conan said, while the watch moved away up the street, dragging corpses.

"Aye."

"Feel up to walking?"

"Whither?"

"We to escort you to the house of Sfalana, and

then to . . . go our way. Think how the dear sweet melon-lady will want to nurse her wounded hero. On the morrow I will tell Noble Khashtris and darling Spartus of your wounding, so there will be no objection to your absence. Peradventure Khashtris will want to go and see the magistrate, herself."

"Hm! But Sfalana may be abed by now . . ."

"How could she not rouse herself happily to take in a poor wounded man?"

"Ah-hmm. And you . . ."

"I am going to show Rosela the gardens behind our little home, Shubal."

"Co-nan . . ."

"Hush, Rosela darling; say me nay and I'll search the city for that weasel who chased you into my arms—and give you back!"

"No no dear boy, it's just that you're holding my hand and every time you emphasize a word you nigh squeeze it in twain!"

Shubal laughed and took up his place on her other side.

"To Sfalana's!"

"To Sfalana's and then to the garden!"

And so Conan and Rosela of Khauran escorted the wounded Shubal to the home of Sfalana, seller of fruits, and Conan took Rosela into the gardens of the Noble Khashtris, and showed her many things. And with his soul returned to him, and Rosela to hand, Conan let slip from his mind his nervousness and suspicions of the lord Sergianus of Nemedi—or of Koth?—and a week passed, and to the Cimmerian one afternoon fell a strange duty.





8.

**PLOT
AND
COUNTERPLOT**

It came about in this wise:

Rosela gained employment in the palace; Shubal's arm began healing nicely. Next, the queen honored an agreement made months before; she rode down to some Khaurani town or other to join the priests in dedicating a new temple to Ishtar. With her went both Sergianus and Acrallidus. Khashtris would look after Princess Taramis.

At the last moment it was agreed that the child would remain in her own chambers rather than visit her cousin. Conan and Shubal accompanied Khashtris to the palace, with the Cimmerian feeling more dissatisfied than ever. The prospect of seeing Rosela did not help; he'd be with Khashtris and Shubal, guarding a six-year-old!

He only just saw Taramis, whom he had never met—if one “meets” six-year-old pre-girls, he thought sourly. Nor of course did she take any note of him; she had been surrounded by uniformed sword-wearers all her life and took less note of their faces than she did of individual spoons at meals. Shortly after her midday snack, Taramis became drowsy and Khashtris took her up for a nap.

The princess was provided with a suite of two rooms. While she slept, Conan was made no happier by having to sit with Shubal and Khashtris in the anteroom: the large chamber was all silk and satin and fluff, in white, pale yellow and green, the colors of Khauran. The Cimmerian proved no good student of the game with cards the two tried to teach him.

When Khashtris said she had business and departed, the men assumed it was to answer a call of

nature. Shubal decided to go and see about a bit of wine; Conan enthusiastically agreed and grimly remained. At least, the big morose youth thought, reduced to being nursemaid, the brat slept!

It was then that rescue arrived: into the room swayed Rosela, smiling. She bore a man-sized goblet.

"Here, get that vast hand off me, lunk—this wine is from the queen's own supply! Drink before someone comes and I am punished for stealing. Ouch! I'm still tender there from night before last!"

Wrinkling his features into a ridiculous expression, Conan sipped daintily. "Hmm. Not a bad vintage," he said, in an assumed voice that was supposed to mimic an effete esthete of the court. And then with a grin—while one hand remained intimately busy with Rosela—he drank it off. He lowered the emptied silver goblet and her upper garment, with a long sigh of satisfaction.

"And now, my dear girl, do taste this good wine from my lips!"

"Oh Co-nan, you're such a—"

He was still kissing her when he collapsed.

Next Conan knew, Khashtris and Shubal were shaking and slapping him, bidding him wake. Foggily he saw that tears glistened on Khashtris's face. What happened? Suddenly he was lunging to his feet, staggering, and reaching for his sword. It was gone. Conan shot Shubal a confused look.

It was then that the dizzied Cimmerian saw the man who lay sprawled in blood on a fine green rug edged with cloth-of-gold. The fellow lay still—and his dead hand was fisted around Co-

nan's sword! The Cimmerian reeled, glanced again at his employer and fellow guard, and sat down as suddenly as he had risen.

"You've saved my life several times, Conan," Shubal said. "It is my pleasure to have saved yours."

Conan stared. His head was far from clear.

"Shubal saved both you and the princess from that man," Khashtris told him.

"You must have been drugged," Shubal said, "as the princess must have been, earlier. I came in to find this fellow on the point of skulking into her bedchamber, with your sword in his hand."

Conan shook his head. *Drugged? Rosela?* "Wh-y?"

"I'd say this wight meant to murder the princess and make it look as if you did it, my Cimmerian friend. See if you knew him."

For several moments longer Conan stared dully at Shubal. Then he slid down to one knee beside the man whose blood ruined a royal carpet. Without care or that ridiculous "respect for the dead" he had first heard of here in "civilized" Khauran, Conan twisted the fellow's head around. A corpse stared glassily.

"He . . . he is famil . . . I have seen him befo—Shubal! This is the man who followed Rosela that night she came fleeing into the tavern!"

"Ah. Well, it wasn't Rosela he was after today!"

Conan extricated his sword from the man's hand, which had not yet constricted in that final stony grip. He stood and sheathed the weapon. "Rosela came in just after you left," he said. "She brought me wine—in a silver cup."



"It isn't here now, Conan," Shubal said quietly. "And she wasn't here when I entered." Shubal shook his head. "It looks as if your meeting with her was no accident. She and this man arranged it. You were—we were both taken in."

"The same night someone murdered that Nemedian and tried to kill you."

"And today, Taramis," Khashtris said, actually wringing her hands. "Why?"

Conan was grinding his teeth. He thought on Rosela, realizing how he had been duped; how she had hurled herself into his arms, most literally, and had since trusted with him again and again. *All the while only gaining my confidence, to use me!* And she had. Because of her, Taramis should be dead and Conan accused; the big barbarian no one really knew anything about!

"She was someone's tool, as was this." Conan's foot thumped the man Shubal had slain. "And those two who murdered the Nemedian . . . Nebinio . . . who knew there is no Duke of Tor in Nemedias!"

"Aye," Shubal said, nodding grim-faced. "Aye, my friend. Remember our 'writing lesson'. You were noticed staring at him—who must somehow be Sabaninus . . . and you are a danger to him. So, the heir to the throne is killed, giving the queen even more reason and need to seek solace, and wed again. And should she . . . die, she'd leave him or his heir as ruler of Khauran! While you, foreigner, are safely and legally slain for a most horrible murder!"

Khashtris was pleading: "What are you TALKing about? Who is HE?"

"The deaths, then," Conan said, "are of equal

importance to him, and to someone else . . . his Khaurani confederate!"

"Buy WHY!" Khashtris demanded, streaming tears. "Who?"

Her bodyguards looked at each other. They nodded in mutual decision; they told Khashtris. They told her all of it. She sank down on the couch strewn with yellow pillows.

"Ishtar!" she hissed, barely audible. "And when I saw Rosela hurrying so, I wondered what you had done to her, Conan!"

"Saw her? Where?"

"Going . . . going out into the garden."

Grinding his teeth, the Cimmerian left them. His head was trying to swim as he stalked through the palace on tingling legs. Angrily, he pinched his forearm, again and again. Blood showed there when he emerged into the spacious garden behind the palace. He did not call out; he searched. He was several minutes finding Rosela, who was in a far corner amid a little grove of some low evergreens clipped to resemble horse-heads.

She lay on the ground. She had been stabbed more than once, low.

"Oh . . . Co-nan . . ."

He crouched beside her, without touching her. His eyes and voice were intense. "Tell me all of it, Rosela. You'll not recover from those stomach wounds. Tell me, or I'll see that you die in worse pain than you know now."

"K-kill me-e, Conan . . ."

"Who, Rosela?"

"Ark . . . Arkhaurs. He hired my brother and me . . . that night. I was to . . . gain your confidence . . ."

"You did, bitch. The very Advisor to the Queen, is it? And today?"

"He knew of the queen's trip. He had me employed here. It was he . . . oh! Hurts, Conan . . . he who arranged that th-the princess would stay here, so you would come with N-Noble Khashtris. Taramis's . . . snack was . . . drugged. And the wine I . . . fetched you. Sorry, Conan, Sorry . . ."

"Of course you are. The rest of it. Arkhaurus stabbed you?"

"My brother Nardius was to . . . kill the princess, with your . . . sword." She was having more difficulty talking. "We were to be rich, Arkhaurus said. He met me here. Instead . . . in . . . stead . . ."

"Instead he met you where you were to be congratulated and paid, and paid you with sharp steel, did he? The dog didn't even do a clean job, but bellystabbed you and left you to die slowly. You weren't a confederate to be made rich, Rosela. You were hired help, and you know more than you should. So—he disposed of you."

She lay staring up at him, and tears slid down toward her ears. And then her mouth and eyes went wide and she was rigid, all over. That spasm ended only with the sighing release of her last long breath.

Conan rose from the fifteen-year-old temptress and monster he had told himself was his woman, and he vowed not to love again, to be wary and but use girls where he found them, and he left her there, dead, without closing her eyes.

The three decided to say nothing of the attempt.



Who knew, aside from Arkhaurus?

"Let me just spit him," Conan said, looking ugly, "and we can put Rosela's brother there, as if he killed Arkhaurus, and we came too late, but slew him. Before he died, he implicated Sergianus . . ."

"Conan, no!" Khashtris strode about, gnawing her lips, wringing her hands until they were red. "No! This is the palace of Khauran! My cousin is involved—I think the poor dear girl loves Sergianus!"

"Suppose you invite him to dinner," the Cimmerian gritted, "and I will 'go berserk' and kill him! The queen will be spared knowing what we know—and saved, along with Khauran. All you need do is give me a little time to be far from here."

"You—you'd take it all on yourself?"

"Why not? I am a foreigner, and what holds me here? I want away from this accursed queen-dom, Khashtris. I do owe a debt to Queen Ialamis . . . you think I mind the blood of Arkhaurus and Sergianus on these hands?" He held them up and stared ferally over his fingertips. "I want their blood there!"

But no, and Khashtris convinced them. They removed the body of Rosela's brother, in cloaks. Khashtris, after mopping and mopping the rug with her own hands, at last sliced her forearm; she'd say the remaining bloodstains were hers, after she'd accidentally cut herself. And she would talk with her cousin. Conan would not remain in the palace, saying that if he saw Arkhaurus, he would surely kill him.

He drank much that night.

Two days later, Khashtris talked with the queen, alone. She returned unhappily to report to her two fellow conspirators.

"She wanted only to talk of Sergianus, dear Sergianus," Khastris told them. "I tried to tell her. I tried. I could not. She has agreed to see you two, though she does not know why."

Conan and Shubal looked at each other, and nodded. An overwrought Khashtris wanted Conan that night, and he refused her.





9.

**A WOLF
IS LOOSE
IN KHAURAN**

Conan and Shubal had audience with the queen, and tried to tell her what they knew and thought they knew. She would not believe. She was horrified at the very thought; she would not listen; she ordered them from her and told them they were no longer welcome in the palace. For tomorrow night's dinner, she would send her own guards to escort her cousin to her.

The two men stalked from the palace. "We must confide in Acrallidus," Shubal said. "Gods! Will no one believe!"

"Easier if I just go and shove steel through that damned charmer Sergianus or Sabaninus or whatever his treacherous name is . . . she loves that demon!"

"How did you feel about Rosela?"

"Shut up, Shubal!"

Shubal sighed and faced his friend, there in the square betwixt lofting palace and imposing temple. "No, Conan. Don't think of it. You would never escape the palace. We are suspect, now. The queen will never let us near him! Come, listen; stop staring at walls and thinking foolishly of scaling them! We must sit down with Acrallidus who is wise, and with Khashtris. We four must plan. He will believe. He must; he is our only hope."

"Our best hope lies in our sheaths, Shubal."

"Damn it, barbarian—must you think only of leaving trails of blood wherever you go?"

Conan stared at him, and after a while Shubal apologized, and Conan agreed to share their knowledge and suspicions with City Governor Acrallidus.

"But how?" the queen's governor of her capital city wondered aloud, once he had heard their story. He looked around Khashtris's most private chamber as though tapestried walls might provide the answer. "How can this Baron Sabaninus make himself younger, or look younger, or—"

"—steal a younger man's body?" Conan suggested. His eyes were beginning to blaze. Talk, talk, and talk. He was tired of talk. His patience was like a wolf on a leash.

"And the way he came here, afoot, tattered, bloodied—"

"None of the blood was his own. He rode up from Koth. Koth, Acrallidus, with two retainers—and he killed them! As he smote, their blood splashed him. Then he drove off his own horses, and tore his own clothing and rolled in the filth. Thus he was a pitiful object to be taken to the queen, helped, sympathized with—damn!" Conan slapped the table around which they sat, and silver-chased goblets of bronze danced and sloshed mulled wine. "You people, you so-civilized people, have you no power to suspect? Have you no ability to believe? It is SORCERY! By Ishtar and Crom and Bel and . . . Erlik, do you who are victims of a demon's curse on your very queen . . . do you not see? Believe! It is sorcery!"

Conan pounced to his feet and paced from them. He wheeled. He had become a great impatient wolf, eyes aflame, every muscle poised to pounce and fight.

"Listen! You three smugly civilized people with your walls and marble halls and magistrates and your clack-clack shoes and swirly robes and ridiculous coiffures—listen! Give listen to one





you call *barbarian*, who was born on a battlefield and has been warrior and thief and has lost and regained his very soul, of sorcery . . . and who has sent off to join the Lord of Death enough men to staff your very palace!"

And he told them of the battle of Venarium in which he'd fought at fifteen, and how he had fought and defeated a dead thing in a crypt because he wanted its sword; he told them of Yara of Arenjun and the elephant-creature in his tower of sorcery, creature from the starry gulf beyond the world; and of the dark wizard Hisarr Zul, and his brother who lived on, as sand—"Sand!"—even ten years after his death, and now he had bested them both. He showed them the clay amulet he wore pendent on his chest, and he told them what it was. And they listened.

"Now we know what he knows. We cannot be wrong! Arkhaurus and Sergianus plot together, and they know I know, and Shubal—and now they must assume you know too, Khashtris! Sergianus does not know this amulet, or what it is. He does not know but that I am a sorcerer—we have twice escaped his snares, Shubal and I! I, Conan, foreigner and *barbarian* as you civilized folk say—I see now how make that demon expose himself. You have only to aid me. Do it!"

Three staring products of the civilization of the west, almost in shock, as if under the Cimmerian's spell, agreed.

"Shubal and I are banned from the palace. We'll not be permitted to enter with you at tomorrow night's dinner—at which we all assume that your queen assuredly intends to announce her betrothal to a trickster determined to hand your land

over to Koth. Khashtris: Shubal and I need your help in getting into the palace. We may have to down a royal guardsman or two, but that is small price for Khauran itself!"

She looked about at the robed man with brown hair and gray beard, and at the Shemite mercenary from a warrior clan; they sat as if enthralled, gazing at the youthful Cimmerian, a warrior and the manager of a city waiting to be instructed; told, led. Khashtris swallowed.

If only I'd had such a son . . . if only he were my son . . . if only I could bear his . . . if only I were younger!

Ishtar! Acrallidus was thinking. *A wolf is loose in Khauran—and he fights for Khauran!*

This man will lead armies someday, Shubal was thinking. *I hope I am there to see and to participate!*

Khashtris spoke. "We will be in the Ashkaurian Room," she said. "It is used as a smaller dining room, and Ialamis loves it. It is also your means of entry. A secret palace escape route leads off it, through the pantry. You two will enter that way." She thought a moment. "Shubal: you must make straight for the dragon-carved door and secure it against the royal guards. Conan—"

"Conan," Conan said low, almost snarling, "will see to the rest."





10.

CONAN MAGUS

All present at the queen's dinner party remarked how she was dressed as a girl, and looked younger. Almost shockingly, her hair was down and bound by a fillet of silver that held a flashing sapphire on her forehead. Pearl-sewn bands of gold encircled both forearms and each wrist was braceleted in silver set with amethysts. Otherwise, she wore above the hips only a pearl-sewn bandeau of white silk imported from afar, supported by a neck-strap of woven cloth-of-gold. Her lowslung skirt was side-slit nearly to the hip-band, from which depended plackets of black cloth that were scintillantly alive with rubies and garnets, sapphires and carnelians, topazes and emeralds, and a single great piece of amethyst.

Her happiness and brightness infectiously carried to most of her guests; Arkhaurus and his so-thin wife, once of Koth; Sergianus the Nemedian dukeson whose tunic and overtunic were both sleeveless to display his youthful arms; the two lord cousins of the queen, and the wife of one. Present too though less festive were Noble Khashtris and Governor Acrallidus and his wife.

Servants passed to and from the pantry bearing dish after savory dish to set before the diners, whose goblets of gold were kept filled with three several wines of fine vintage and bouquet.

Khashtris waited nervously. No untoward sound emerged from the pantry; Conan and Shubal did not come. She had taken leave of them at her home, after forcing upon each a little figurine of Ishtar, for Khashtris was a believer. Her heart thudded and she was hot and prickly. Already she had drunk too much wine to assuage her thirst; it was exerting the opposite effect now.

drying her mouth already dry with apprehension.

At last the fruit was brought, and the queen arose. Khashtris gripped the table's edge, awaiting the terrible announcement of betrothal. It did not come. Telling them happily that she had as unique entertainment the illusionist Crispis from down in Kandala, Ialamis clapped her hands. The tall door of carven wood, edged with filigree in bronze, was opened from without.

The diners gaped at the advent of the illusionist. Crispis was an uncommon tall man, and apparently a burly one as well though he was swallowed within a great black robe like a tent. Its hood was up and within could be seen only shadows, darkness and the tip of a nose—and the great dark brown beard that flowed forth. He wore a single black glove; the left sleeve of his robe dangled loose and empty.

"I smell . . . horse," Arkhaurus's wife whispered, and was shushed by her husband.

The only alleviation of the darkness of Crispis's appearance drew every gaze. The amulet lay on his chest just below the beard, a small golden swordshape set with a topaz at the end of each bar of its guard; they were like eyes.

"Welcome," the queen said, seating herself, "O Master Crispis! Though I have not seen you before now, I have heard naught but praise of your skills."

The tall robe bowed, straightened. A gloved hand rose to finger the amulet. When the voice emerged from the cowl, it was so deep as to be obviously artificial, and one or two of Ialamis's guests smiled.

"Crispis will amaze you with his knowledge of

yourselves, Lady Queen and noble guests, with the aid of the twin all-seeing eyes of the magic amulet: the Eye of Erlik! Ah! Already I perceive that the glorious Queen of Khauran contemplates the making of an important announcement! Fear not; Crispis will say no more of it, for the revelation is yours to make."

While he bowed, Ialamis and Sergianus exchanged a look, and smiled.

Again the gloved hand fingered the amulet. "Oho . . . Noble K—Noble Khashtris, is it not? A woman of softness and sentiment and religious beliefs! I see that you wear concealed an image of Ishtar . . . though far from Crispis to name the place wherein you have it tucked. It belonged to your mother."

Though she blushed and tried to smile, the importunities of the others coaxed Khashtris to confirm the seer's words: she produced from between her breasts the little figurine Conan and Shubal had seen her tuck there. Now she wondered: In what dark closet was poor Crispis of Kandala bound and gagged, and what horse had given up much of its mane to provide the beard that flowed from the cowl of the black robe?

"How now!" Arkhaurus called, smiling, and lifted his goblet to Crispis. "We have with us a seer indeed—and well upbrought, too!"

While others chuckled, Crispis spoke: "Aye, O lord, for with the aid of this amulet from the mages of far Iranistan, Crispis sees all. I see you, great advisor to a queen enthroned, riding a high-stepping horse. It is a Kothic horse and bears Koth's arms, I see . . . and why is my lord's table dagger dripping with blood?"



All were silent. Arkhaurus had gone red as Khashtris had been, save for his knuckles. They were white around his goblet. He stared down at the jeweled eating utensil on his plate. Its blade was unsmearcd.

"Cryptic seer," Acrallidus said. "Plan you a trip to Koth, Lord Arkhaurus?"

"I do not!"

"Ah," Crispis said, drawing it out until he had regained their attention. "Perhaps I see awrong. Yet beside you on another horse, a royal palfrey of Koth, I see riding an old, old man. Dry as dust he is, thin, shaky of hands, bald of crown yet with strings of hair hanging down like a fringe of yellowish white. A man two of whose lower foreteeth are missing. A man wearing a medallion . . . ah. Your pardon my good lord. I'd not seen you sitting there next the queen, in the blaze of her glory. The congratulations of Crispis on how well you bear the weight of your many, many years, and even the baronial weight of that medallion of Korveka."

"What means he? You, Lord Sergianus?"

"Korveka?"

"Speaks he to young Sergianus?"

"See here, Crispis . . ."

"Ah! Now I see the source of the blood on your dagger, Lord Advisor to the Queen . . . it is that of a girl . . . a tool, helpless and young . . . wait, do not speak, her name comes—Ah! Rosela!"

Arkhaurus half rose; amid deadly silence, Crispis's voice asked a question. "My good lord Baron Sabaninus of Koth . . . why call you yourself 'Sergianus', and pretend to be young? Behold—when I cover all my amulet and even the eyes, all

here see you as you really are!"

Gone pale, Sergianus could only sit stiffly, looking back at staring eyes; the eyes of everyone at table, their gazes fixed on him . . .

Then the queen rose. "What means this?"

She spoke to Crispis. Poor Sergianus, already believing that his true form had somehow been made visible to all, made the logical error; he assumed that she spoke to him.

"It means this Crispis must be a—a—some sort of spy!" Sergianus cried desperately, while he rose. From a side slit in the long-shirted overtunic he drew a sword, and rushed down-table on its left, toward the black-robed magus. "I'll have that amulet, dog!"

The pantry door swept open. "No, Sabaninus of Koth," Shubal said, "you'll have what you deserve, Kothic plotter against Khauran!"

Perhaps the game was not quite up until then; Sergianus of course remained Sergianus. Arkhaurus's hand snatched up his dagger, and he swung, and drove it into Shubal's thigh. "Meddling Shemite!"

Shubal groaned aloud; the blade caught in muscle and while Arkhaurus strove to free it, Shubal twisted his sword so that it touched the neck of my lord Arkhaurus.

"Release the blade, traitor," the Shemite said. "It can remain where it is. Others will remain still, else I slit the throat of this mis-advisor!"

All in the room froze; Sergianus already had, at the sudden bursting of Shubal among them. Now he returned his attention to Crispis—who, having slit his robe up the front with the dagger he held within, left-handed, threw back his cowl. He

dropped the robe to reveal a huge young man in a mail corselet.

"It's—that barbarian!"

"Conan!"

"You!"

"Khashtris!" the queen cried. "What means thi—guards!"

Conan kicked violently backward. The door slammed and his dagger-hand swung back to drop the heavy bar into its brace. A moment later the door was struck by a shoulder on its other side; it did not yield. This room was haven and means of escape in the event of siege, and the bar was of iron.

Sergianus drove at the Cimmerian. Pouncing away, Conan whipped up his own sword and struck hard. Sergianus was able to dodge the stroke, and a moment later Crispis's "beard" was thrown at his face.

"Here, my lord of Korveka—a gift from a horse!"

While Sergianus fought away the mass of hair, Conan pounced far to his right, and sent his blade skimming over the head of a woman who shrieked and fainted. Had he intended his point for her, she'd have been bloody rather than with her face in her gravy; the first inch of Conan's blade drove just where he had aimed: into the throat of Arkhaurus.

"For Rosela, murdering traitor—I feared Shubal would steal you from me!"

Arkhaurus's wife shrieked. Sergianus, recovered, swung high his blade and began his swing as he pounced at Conan. The Cimmerian's sword clanged off the Kothian's; both men staggered and



Conan went to one knee—and his left hand flashed up to imbed a foot of his dagger's blade in Sergianus's belly.

Every breath was held while Sergianus stood very still, so rigid that he quivered all over.

"He's DEAD!" Arkaurus's wife screamed into the silence. "O Ishtar, no, No my love! It was not WORTH it! I BEGGED you not to ally yourself with that Korvekan imposter! O Ishtar help me—why did I not tell the queen when first you and he plotted? My lord is dead," she wailed, hugging a seated corpse, "dead . . . a traitor!"

Sergianus remained standing, shaking as though caught in an icy wind. Conan's left arm twisted viciously and he withdrew his dagger. A splash of blood followed, and continued freely flowing.

"Not—enough," Shubal gritted, and dropped his sword. With a grunt he plucked the dagger from his leg, swiftly dragged its bloody tip across the front of his tunic, reversed it, and slammed it at Sergianus with all his strength. His leg scarlet to the ankle, Shubal began sliding down, his back against the pantry door.

The slippery knife did not fly true. Not its point but its pommel struck Sergianus, in the temple. The sound of impact was loud, and followed by the queen's scream. She came rushing down the aisle formed between wall and table, opposite Shubal. New cries and a scream rose, for as Sergianus began to fall—he changed.

The weeping, moaning queen reached the fallen man just in time to look down upon . . . not Sergianus, but the old, old man described by "Crispis." Who had slain him, whether Conan or

Shubal, was unknown and unimportant; the fact was that he was dead, and in death Sabaninus resumed his own form. He stared up from rheumy old eyes at the queen he had duped, but he did not see her.

Slowly Ialamis looked up at Conan.

"He is the Baron of Korveka in Koth, my lady Queen," he told her. "Through some sorcery he took on younger appearance, and assumed a title and name; Tor of Nemedia is not even a duchy. I saw him as he was my first day here, at the instant of my soul's returning to my body. He and Arkhaurus plotted together; your treacherous advisor's Kothic wife will tell you the story. Only Shubal prevented their agents, Rosela and her brother Nardius, from killing the princess while you were away. You restored to me my soul, Queen of Khauran; I return to Khauran its soul!"

"I wish I'd never seen you. Get away from that door."

In mute surprise, Conan did so. She seized the bar. When he sought to aid her, she threw her weight against him, wrenched free, and unbarred the door herself. Poised guards nearly fell, finding their swords-drawn rush blocked by their leiged lady.

"Sergianus was a Kothic imposter and Arkhaurus a traitor in league with him," she told the uniformed men, in a flat, dull voice that might have emerged from a sarcophagus. "Conan and Shubal have saved the realm. Call my physician to attend Shubal at once. Take your orders from Noble Khashtris."

And she was gone in a rush of sideslit skirts and flashing legs.





Thus was Khashtris occupied for a time, ere she could hurry from the others and rush to her cousin's apartment. A leech hurried in to bend over Shubal; guardsmen removed corpses with Arkhaurus's widow still clinging to him, weeping.

"You've saved us all, Conan," Acrallidus said. "Ye gods—and our poor accursed queen thought she had found happiness at last—with that!"

Conan glanced at the soles of Sergianus/Sabaninus's boots as he was carried from the chamber. "You must counsel her close and be as her father, Acrallidus."

Acrallidus sighed. "And you, Conan. You must remain with us, close to us, protecting the queen so that she knows she is secure . . . and her daughter, our future queen. Were Khauran to fall into dispute or a queen to die heirless . . . Kothic troops would be here within weeks!"

"But," Conan began, "I—"

He was interrupted by the sound of a shriek of horror and sorrow. Both men rushed, trailed by confused palace guards, to the apartment of the queen. They discovered that it was Khashtris they'd heard; she sat on the floor with her royal cousin's head in her lap. Just under her pearl-glistening bandeau of soft white silk, Queen Ialamis had stabbed herself.

"Only Sergianus," Ialamis said in a tiny voice, "gave me reason to live. I end this . . . miserable life. Ac-Acrallidus . . ." She shuddered. "Good Acrallidus, counsel a-and guide Tar-amis for—uh!—for she will need you sorely. I—regret only tha-at I l-eave her . . . alone. Perhaps she . . . she and your K-rallides . . ." She broke off again,

coughing blood. "Co-Conan . . . I suppose you saved Khaurannn. But . . . but I—I'd have been ha . . . hap-pee . . ." Again she shuddered, and her head fell aside in death.

The smoke from a score of censers eddied from the temple of Ishtar, mingling with the mournful sound of the priests. Beneath the temple, in the Royal Mausoleum, Ialamis had joined her husband and unhappy ancestors. Down the broad steps paced Conan, towering over the woman at his side. Her hair was down, but covered in the white homespun veil of Khaurani mourning.

She spoke. "Nothing will change your mind, will it?"

"No."

She looked up at his face. "Oh damn you! How I wish you were older or I younger!"

"I am glad we are as we are, Khashtris, for I would love you, and I have much of the world to see ere I and a woman say words before some priest."

"Thank your gods for that. You have re-covered that amulet with clay."

"Yes. The Eye of Erlik has no power for me, but only for a ruler I'll not tell you of. It was I deluded Sabaninus, not the amulet. Even Crispis has forgiven me, once I remembered to go and free him and you gave him that nicely clinking bag. This amulet has served its purpose for Khauran. Now I leave Khauran, and I must have the Eye of Erlik thus again: disguised."

At the foot of the steps, she halted. "Take this." Into his hand she placed a half-circle of silver: a Queenhead cut in half. "The other half of this will

be worn around the neck of her you may have made a happy queen of Khauran—eventually: Taramis. I will see to it. She will know of you. You will ever be able to find employment here, though I—I—” She closed his hand over the bit of metal. “Though I am gone.”

Funeral or no, Noble Lady Khashtris or no, Conan was about to embrace her when he heard the voice of Acrallidus: “Conan! I need to talk with you!”

Conan turned to face the man, green-robed and white-veiled. “No need, Acrallidus. I will not remain in this shadowed kingdom . . . queendom. Shadizar may be called the City of Wickedness, but I am not saint, and my horses are ready. I ride west and north—now.” He affected not to notice the ring Khashtris was sliding onto his finger.

“But—”

“He will not convince, Acrallidus,” Khashtris said. “I understand. And Shubal, too, understands; I think he would leave me to go with you were he hale, Conan. He lost much blood and must rest for a week at least.”

“Oh—he and I have a terrible bill at the tavern of one Hilides, Khashtris. Fifty Queenheads, I think.”

She looked at him, knowing he lied. “I will give Shubal the money to pay it, Conan. I hope it doesn’t end in the hands of a certain pedlar of fruits! As for you—hold onto that coin, Conan—that half-coin.”

“I will keep it,” Conan said, and thought, or try to. “I will keep it, and remember. Mayhap some day I will return to Khauran, to see how fares Queen Taramis. I know you and Acrallidus will

guide her well; for now, Khauran is your responsibility. I am for Shadizar, home of cults and wine and women . . . two of which are more to my liking than poor curse-haunted Khauran and service to a child enthroned."

The Cimmerian turned and walked away toward the bored boy who had minded his horses these past several hours. Conan was a little bit older, and a little bit wiser, and he had his soul. As for his ever returning to Khauran of the Unhappy Queens . . . who could know?

